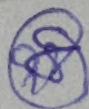


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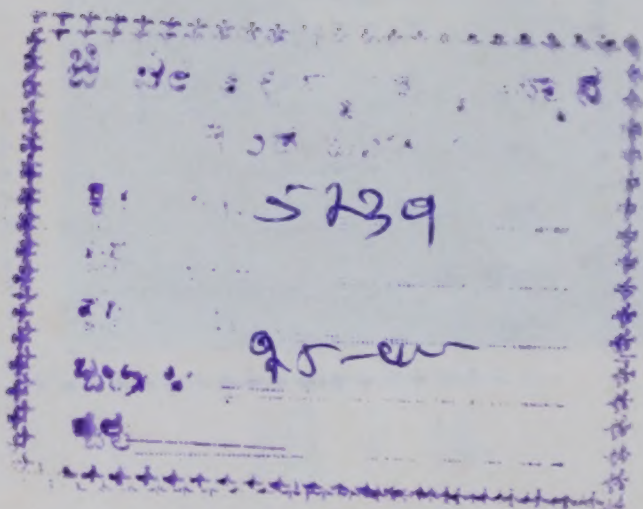
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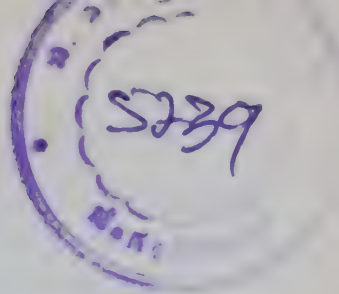
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HOW I WROTE "THE HURRICANE"

When I arrived in Northeast China in the winter of 1946 the land reform was already in progress. The Northeast Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was then calling upon government workers to go to the countryside to lead the peasants in this mass movement. The contradictions and struggles between peasants and landlords were among the main contradictions and struggles of our time and I knew that the land reform was one of the keys to victory in our revolution. This understanding, combined with a sense of duty to the revolution, made me eager to be sent to the countryside. At that time, I wanted only to plunge myself heart and soul into the struggle; I had no idea of writing a novel.

In order to carry out the land reform successfully, it was necessary to live with the peasant masses and to feel as they did. During the several months of our stay in villages in the northern part of Northeast China, we lived and worked with these tillers of the land. We ate like them, our daily meals consisting of nothing but ground maize and salted vegetables. To have lived a little better would have meant to detach ourselves from the masses for, after fourteen years of cruel oppression and exploitation under Japanese rule, the life of the peasants in the Northeast was extremely hard. Many of them were living on wild herbs and acorns while girls of seventeen or eighteen went around half-naked for want of clothes.

At the beginning, the peasants did not understand us: they could judge us only by what they saw of us. It was not until they had found that we were actually living simply and eating even worse than they that they were convinced that we had come for their good and that we harboured no ulterior motives. We put away our leather shoes for fear that such shoes would remind them of the puppet Manchukuo police who had persecuted them. And soon, as a result of such self-denial on our part, the peasants came to trust us and to show concern for our well-being and safety. At night,

for instance, when we had to go out, peasants with rifles would escort us. Once we had established such close ties with them, they willingly told us of their bitter past and their innermost secrets or chatted with us about farming and the local situation; and they were willing to struggle with us against the traitors, local despots and landlords who had oppressed and exploited them. Some of the peasant activists, who distinguished themselves in the struggle, were on excellent terms with us. Thus when Hua Yu-yung, a peasant hero who had fought the Kuomintang bandits and spies, fell ill and died in 1947, he asked after me even in his last hours. I shall never forget his friendship and that of my other comrades-in-arms.

For about six months, I took part in the land reform in a district of Shangchih County, Heilungkiang Province. I also visited other areas, so that I was able to see for myself the entire process of this great struggle. When I arrived in Harbin, I decided to use the lively and rich material I had collected in the land reform in the Northeast to describe how our Party, for more than twenty years, had been leading the people in the great and bitter struggle against imperialism and feudalism, and to depict the peasants' happiness and sorrows during this period, so as to educate and inspire the revolutionary masses as a whole. To this end, I spent three months writing the first part of *The Hurricane* and later devoted another six months to writing the second volume.

As I was able to read newspapers and documents and to attend meetings all the time that I worked in the countryside, I had a good knowledge of the land reform movement in the entire Northeast; and the fact that I had heard a great many stories about similar types of incidents made it relatively easy for me to build up the plot and characters. The characters and events I have written about in *The Hurricane* are, for the most part, modelled on real persons and based on facts. For instance, the death of Chao Yu-lin, Chairman of the Peasants' Association, his wife's mourning, the villagers' grief at his death, and the memorial meeting—all this is based upon fact. There was a Communist named Wen Feng-shan in one village, who had only just been appointed to a post when he was murdered by a landlord; and this moved us so deeply that I put him in the novel, in the hope that the description of the heroic death of this revolutionary as well as the class consciousness and grief his death aroused among the peasants might serve to educate our younger

generation and inspire them to follow the examples set by our heroic revolutionary martyrs.

A writer cannot shut himself in a room and write only from imagination. If he does so, he often makes ridiculous blunders. For example, in drafting the first part of my novel, I described Comrade Little Wang shooting at a pheasant on the roadside in July. Later, however, I became doubtful as to whether a pheasant could be found by the roadside in July; and in order to clear up this point and many others on which I was still uncertain, I went back once more to the countryside. I was told that in summer pheasants seldom fly down from the mountains and that only in winter, when the mountains are covered with snow, do they come to the roadside in search of food. So, I substituted a rabbit for the pheasant. During this visit to the countryside, I gathered a great deal of valuable new material which helped me to make many important corrections in the original manuscript.

Besides describing what I myself had witnessed and heard in the villages, I made use of the supplementary material I had collected in newspapers and publications for certain less important details. The stories about the land reform in *The Northeast China Daily* and the many pamphlets on the subject issued by the Party committees of higher levels proved very helpful. The scenes I sketched of the fights with bandits were partly based on stories the peasants had told me. Though I had never fought any bandits myself, I did arrest and interrogate a few; and since I had worked in the revolutionary army, I knew a little about fighting. The material I had thus collected and my own knowledge of military tactics enabled me to describe the encounters with the bandits. Thus, by listening to detailed accounts, by studying the experiences of others, by correctly analysing and reviewing them and by infusing one's own experiences into them, a writer can turn indirect material into direct material. We must be sure, however, in using indirect material, to make full use of our knowledge of life and of our imagination and to think out carefully all characters and events we are describing.

The Hurricane is not free from certain shortcomings. For example, the story is not sufficiently well-integrated, the characters are not sufficiently typical and the failure to delete many details irrelevant to the plot has detracted from the artistic power of the

book. At the outset, I felt that every incident in the land reform should be included in the story, but this proved impossible in practice. If one attempts to include everything when writing a novel about the great land reform movement, none of the events will leave a deep impression on the reader and none of the characters will be vivid enough. In describing a character, the writer must observe and study carefully the characteristics of many persons of the same type and then present a composite picture of a typical character like Tsao Hsueh-chin's Lin Tai-yu, Shih Nai-an's Lu Chih-shen and Lu Hsun's Ah Q.¹

Lastly, I would like to say something about the problem of language. Language is the medium with which a writer works; and if we present peasant dialogue without using the language of peasants, the result will certainly be unrealistic. The speech of peasants is characterized by richness of imagery, liveliness and simplicity born of their rich knowledge of work on the land and of struggle.

A peasant who is poor and has nothing to eat will say, "The lid is never lifted from my pan." If his family has no land, he says, "The land outside my door belongs to others." From these examples we can see that in some respects, the language of peasants is superior to that of the intellectuals who have long been divorced from reality.

This is a brief account of how I wrote *The Hurricane*.

¹ Lin Tai-yu is the heroine in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Tsao Hsueh-chin (1719-1764). Lu Chih-shen is one of the main characters in the novel *Water Margin* by Shih Nai-an (14th century). Ah Q is the hero of *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Hsun (1881-1936).

"In a very short time, in China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a tornado or tempest, a force so extraordinarily swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to suppress it."

Mao Tse-tung

PART ONE

I

ONE early morning in July, the sunrise was daubing the green fields of maize and kaoliang with a transparent film of gold. The dew on the bean leaves and vegetables glistened like a myriad of silver beads. Greyish wisps of kitchen smoke were curling up from the yellowish earthen house-tops in the villages beside the highway. Here and there, droves of cattle were winding their way to the pasture lying farther beyond. Sitting astride an unsaddled stallion was a cowherd in a pointed straw-hat, brandishing a whip and shouting now and then at his herd, to keep it from straying to the green fields. From behind him a four-wheeled cart came rumbling down the road, the carter cursing the horses. The cowherd turned round and looked at the cart and the men on it, forgetting for the moment about his herd. A bullock at the head, taking advantage of this opportunity, went and helped itself to the nearest maize plants.

"Look! Your bull's eating the crop!" somebody on the cart exclaimed, whereupon the boy quickly jumped off his horse, rushed forward, and gave the cunning, greedy bullock a good whack.

It was late July, 1946. On the highway east of Harbin in Heilungkiang Province of Northeast China, this big cart drawn by four horses, having left Chuho County, was heading for Yuanmao Village. Leaving West Gate Bridge behind, the carter began cracking his whip, which coiled up and then lashed out, while the horses galloped on, spattering mud on the weeds, maize leaves and telegraph poles by the roadside. After covering a good distance, the perspiring team snorted and began to slow down.

"So you're tired after a few steps," grumbled the carter. "When you eat, you must have the best of food—soya bean cake and kaoliang, not satisfied with hay or weeds. But when it comes to work, you jib. I'll give you a good hiding, sure as I'm a good carter." This was all talk though, for his whip never fell. And the horses knew quite well that their master had a sharp tongue but a kind heart. As a matter of fact, he was willing for them to go slow. So the

cart jogged slowly forward on the level ground, the horses puffing and snuffling as they ambled along. Old Sun turned round and looked at his fares. There were fifteen of them sitting packed together, some in grey uniform, some in blue jackets, some with automatics, some clutching rifles. "Which unit of the Eighth Route Army¹ do they belong to?" he wondered. "And what are they going to Yuanmao for?" He did not know. But that did not matter, for they would pay the fare, and that was the main thing. The previous day, he had been hired to drive a load of firewood to town for sale. At night, he had put up at Wang's Inn, where he had been engaged by someone from the county government to drive fifteen men to Yuanmao the next morning, as he was doing now. It was a piece of good luck to have business on the trip home, and earn enough for a drink.

The lumbering cart got stuck in the mud. Cursing his beasts, Old Sun jumped down to investigate. The wheels were bogged down in the mire, up to the axles. Heaving a sigh of annoyance, he climbed back onto the cart and started whipping the horses in earnest. All the passengers got down to help, and began pushing the cart. At this moment a rubber-tyred carriage drawn by four horses came up from behind. Seeing a cart stuck before him, the driver veered to one side and whisked past over a puddle, bespattering the carter on the face, hands, and clothes. The former turned round to give the latter a look and a grin, and drove away triumphantly. Old Sun wiped his face with his sleeve, muttering:

"Damn your unseeing eyes!"

"Whose carriage is that?" asked one of the men on the cart. He was medium-sized and in his thirties. Old Sun recognized him as Team Leader Hsiao, the man who had come the previous night for his cart, and answered vaguely:

"Who else could have such a fine carriage? Did you see those roan horses of his, so strong and sleek? When they gallop, their hooves scarcely seem to touch the ground!"

"Who's the owner?" repeated Team Leader Hsiao.

¹ The predecessor of the present Chinese People's Liberation Army, it came into being at the beginning of the anti-Japanese war in 1937 when the Chinese Red Army which had been fighting the Japanese troops in Northwest China under the leadership of the Communist Party of China was reorganized after the Kuomintang government had been compelled to co-operate with the Communist Party of China.

The eager way he asked only made Old Sun suspect a catch and he hedged.

The team leader dropped the question and urged the carter to try once more to get the cart out of the mire. He whipped the horse in the shafts for all he was worth while the men helped push and drag. Finally they got it out of the mud. They took a breath and then got onto the cart and started off again.

"Old Sun, I saw you lashing only the horse in the shafts," said Team Leader Hsiao. "Is that fair?"

"Don't blame me; blame him for being the strongest!" laughed the carter. There were still specks of mud in the deep wrinkles on his forehead.

"Do you mean to say that good horses should get most of the beating?" asked the team leader, nonplussed.

"It's like this, Comrade Team Leader. When a cart's stuck in the mud, unless you beat the strongest horse you can't get it out. If you beat the strongest, he'll pull for all he's worth—as hard as the other three put together. If you beat the weak ones, you can beat them to death, but it won't get you anywhere. Every trade has its tricks. Truth to tell, in all the four hundred families of Yuanmao, you'll hardly find a better carter than me."

"How long have you been at it?" queried Team Leader Hsiao.

"Twenty-eight years. But all the time I've been driving for other people." Old Sun narrowed his left eye to make sure that the road ahead was now better and safe enough for him to relax a bit. Driving his horses at an easy trot, he began entertaining his guests with a little story about himself. Back in 1941, he had quitted driving and taken to farming. He had opened up about fifty *mou*¹ of wasteland. In the autumn he reaped about fifty piculs of maize, which filled two big bins to overflowing. Fortune, he thought, had actually smiled upon him; but then he was suddenly taken ill with typhoid. He paid medical expenses, grain taxes, and various levies. Before the winter was out, all his grain had completely disappeared! And during his illness the Japanese army had requisitioned his land. After he recovered, there was nothing for it but to pick up his whip again and ply his old trade.

"Comrade Team Leader, I believe only those born under a lucky star can hope to make a fortune, and I wasn't born that way. That's

¹About 1/6 of an acre.

why all the golden corn I had cropped with the sweat of my brow melted away before winter was over. It was fate. After that I lost heart. That very year the bandits paid a visit to Yuanmao and made off with all my foodstuffs, clothes and bed-clothes. My belly became as empty as the pot and my body as naked as the bed. Then, fortunately, the Eighth Route Army came—the Third Battalion of the 359th Brigade. They smashed the bandits and threw open the granary to the starving people—corn, rice, and what not! My share was a picul of maize. Comrade Team Leader, how true the proverb is: It's always darkest before dawn. Why, heaven won't let even a blind sparrow starve. We may not have plenty to eat yet, but we're not starving either. We're pulling through all right, aren't we? Whoa, whoa! Where are you heading, you fools?" He was chiding his horses again.

"Any children?" asked the team leader.

The carter chuckled and answered with deliberation:

"How can a carter have children?"

"Why not?"

Shaking his whip in the air, he gave the reason:

"I beat good animals—I've a bad heart—how can I have children?"

"How old is your wife?" chimed in a young man among the group whom everybody called Little Wang.

"Forty-nine."

"Then there's no hurry," Wang pursued with a grin. "She will yet bless you with offspring. Eighty-eight, not too late."

A roar of mirth went up, Old Sun himself joining in the laughter. To show what a good driver he was, he set his horses galloping like the wind. They veered right and left as he ordered them. He handled his cart as adroitly as boatmen on the Sungari do their boats. After a while, he let them proceed at a canter. Pointing to a cluster of red-brick buildings a little way off the road, Old Sun recalled aloud:

"That used to be the headquarters of the Japanese military land-reclamation corps. It was evacuated on August the fifteenth, 1945. Villagers came from miles round to pick up what they could. 'Why don't you go?' my wife asked. 'There's no fortune in my horoscope,' said I. 'Anything I took I'd be bound to lose. What's ill gained is ill spent.' One day when all the neighbours came home

with horses, guns and bolts of blue cloth, my wife cursed me: 'You poor devil! May hunger and cold crack your wretched bones! Serves you right. This life with you is hell. While they're all making hay while the sun shines, but here you sit idle blaming your stars.' I said: 'Well, you just wait!' What happened then? A couple of weeks later, Han Number Six went about trying to set up an armed unit and declaring that he had orders from the Kuomintang government to take charge of all the property left behind by the Japanese military. Those who refused to surrender their things were tied up in Han's big courtyard and beaten black and blue. Han himself carted away all the booty—horses, guns, bolts of cloth, clothes, pots and pans, and all the rest. Then, I said to my old woman: 'There, what did I tell you?' She had nothing to say. Women are all the same—can't see any further than their noses. They never think ahead."

"Who's Han Number Six?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

"One of the landlords of Yuanmao."

"What's he like?"

The old carter looked around and kept silent. The team leader, reading his thoughts, tried to encourage him:

"What are you afraid of? We're all members of a land reform work team."

"Afraid? I'm not afraid of anything. I say what I like. As for Han Number Six, well, he's so-so. Look at that corn over there." The carter was drawing a red herring across the track. "It's so short that a sow can reach and eat it without lifting her forelegs. That's thanks to the bandits, too. It's going to be a poor harvest."

Team Leader Hsiao said no more about Han Number Six, but shifted the conversation to the bandits.

"Did you say the bandits raided Yuanmao?"

"I'll say they did. They came twice in May. They stood on guard during the day, and ran wild at night. Forced the women to take off their trousers and stand there while they looked their fill. The beasts!"

"Who was their chief?"

"Liu Tso-fei."

"Who else?"

"Well, I wouldn't know."

He stopped short, and again Hsiao knew better than to press

him. The team leader knew how suspicious old people are, imagining a wolf before them and a tiger behind. He looked at the fields on either side, which showed signs of neglect. The maize leaves were beginning to turn yellow before they had filled out. The wheat was submerged in a sea of grass and weeds which were growing apace. Little Wang caught a glimpse of a grey hare scurrying through the thick undergrowth, and quickly pulled out his automatic—bang! bang! Alarmed, Old Sun quickly got off the cart. The young man was about to fire a third shot, when his leader stopped him.

"Don't waste your cartridges. You'll need them later."

Little Wang put his gun back in place, while Old Sun climbed back onto the cart and drove slowly on again. At a place called Yangchiatien, the carter stopped to feed his horses and have a smoke, but soon took the road again. Now the passengers did not talk much, neither did they doze off. But Old Sun kept throwing friendly remarks across the road to fellows of the same trade coming up from Yuanmao, and the younger members of the land reform work team started singing songs from the opera *The White-haired Girl*. Their leader, silent, fell to pondering over the May Fourth instructions¹ of the Party and the speech Comrade Lin Piao² had delivered at the Railway Workers' Club in Harbin. He mentally went over once more the arguments raised by the comrades at the meeting of the Party county committee he had attended on the previous day. He was in complete accord with what Political Commissar Chang had said: it would be improper to talk about moderation in action without first arousing and organizing the masses. The masses had to rise like a hurricane to do away with centuries-old feudal institutions. It was no joke. It would never do to fear the masses or to limit their activities before they were mobilized. But how to get things going in Yuanmao? Suddenly he heard the carter exclaiming:

"We'll be there in a minute. See that dark huddle of houses over there? That's Yuanmao."

The leader of the work team raised his head and saw in the

¹ Issued on May 4, 1946, by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China regarding the reduction of rent and interest as a step towards the realization of the policy of "land to the tillers."

² One of the distinguished Chinese strategists and political workers. During the War of Liberation in 1946-1949, the troops under his command liberated Northeast China.



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"What's he like?"

The old carter looked around and kept silent.

distance a hill half enveloped in mist, above a line of mud-coloured houses interspersed with dark green trees. So this was where they were to work!

The cart entered the village by the West Gate. On the roadside could still be seen what remained of the defence works of the Third Battalion. A long-necked man with a small head was hawking flapjacks about the street. The moment he saw the new arrivals, he ran up and asked the carter:

"Where are they from? The county seat?"

Old Sun nodded, and the long-necked fellow sneaked away. Once round the corner, he started to run. He reached a high black doorway, flung open the wicket, and scampered through it. This strange behaviour was noticed by Team Leader Hsiao. The doorway looked like a four-pillar pavilion with a dragon-shaped ridge, the door flaps encased in iron and studded with nails. The mansion was set in the middle of paddy fields and vegetable plots. Its high walls were skirted by willows and a moat, and from their four corners towered turrets with pitch black gun slots looked out, like ogres' eyes, over the thatched huts and cart tracks in the village, and all the horses, carts and passers-by. The wicket door was left open by the long-necked man, and through it could be seen the courtyard and buildings inside. The north wing was topped with a tiled roof and its brightly polished glass windows shone. A flock of white geese were waddling about the courtyard. The moment the hawker rushed in, they set up an excited quacking, to be joined by hens clucking, dogs barking and horses neighing.

"Whose house is that?" Team Leader Hsiao asked the carter.

Looking round cautiously and seeing nobody nearby, Old Sun answered:

"Who else could have a house like this? Look at those watch-towers. How imposing!"

"Is it Han Number Six's house?"

"Yes," answered Old Sun. But more than that he would not say.

The advent of a cartload of land reform workers disturbed Han's household and broke the monotony of the life of the villagers. A ripple of excitement ran through the tiled-roof houses and thatched huts. Ragged men and women hurried to the side of the road to stare curiously at the smiling arrivals on the cart. Naked children

ran after the cart, and when it stopped so did they. One little boy, sucking his left fist, cocked his head to watch the men in uniform and their guns with a smile. Then, all of a sudden, he darted towards a tumbledown shack, shouting as he ran:

"Ma, the Eighth Route Army has come back!"

On the roadside, a plump middle-aged woman in a white silk jacket with a long-stemmed pipe in her mouth quickened her steps to turn into a lane, as if afraid to let the new-comers see her.

The cart drew level with a schoolhouse behind a row of elms. Team Leader Hsiao peered through the foliage and saw that the classrooms were empty.

"Suppose we put up here," he suggested.

They all agreed and jumped down one after another. Then they pulled down their baggage-rolls and hauled them into the schoolhouse. Team Leader Hsiao paid Old Sun the fare and, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder, said:

"I'm glad to have met you. Do drop in on us the next time you come this way."

The carter shoved the money into an inside pocket and answered with a broad grin:

"I will. We'll get on all right, we will."

Then he led his horses off—he was going to have a drink.

II

THE arrival of the land reform work team in Yuanmao meant the real beginning of a cataclysmal change. People who live near hills know that when wind comes rain is not far behind. But was it going to be a downpour, or just a drizzle? Nobody dared say. Even wily Han Number Six, who had special sources of information, was at a loss.

Of late his opium lamp had been kept burning day and night. Lolling on the *kang*¹ in a room in the east wing, he burned opium pellets over the flame of the lamp as he talked to his friends and confidants, issuing them instructions, plying them with questions and plotting with them. He found himself unusually busy again,

¹ A brick bed which is kept warm in winter by piping heat under it.

much as he had been a few months before when he went about organizing an armed unit under the Kuomintang. The difference was that this time he was eaten up with anxiety. On his sallow face there was not the ghost of a smile. As a matter of fact, since the Eighth Route Army had driven the bandits out of Yuan-mao, he had grown extremely bad-tempered. He was always smashing things, cursing servants, beating farmhands, quarrelling with his wife. Even his pet concubine could not escape his wrath.

Han Feng-chi was known far and wide. He was the sixth of seven brothers, now in his late forties. An opium smoker, he was so lean and dried and bald above the temples, he looked well over fifty. Behind his back people called him Han Number Six or Han Big Stick. In the time of the puppet Manchukuo regime he had been village head of Yuanmao. Every autumn he went round collecting grain for himself and flax and black currant leaves for the Japanese military. He generally carried a big stick, ready to thwack anybody who offended his ear or eye. At night he frequented the brothel. While he was in the room, he would leave his big stick outside the door, leaning against the wall, to frighten other people away. That was how he came by the name Han Big Stick.

When he saw the work team arrive in the village, the long-necked flapjack man had hurried to tell Han Number Six.

"Oh! Uncle Han! The land reform workers have come!" As he spoke, he put down his basket and came up to the edge of the *kang*. Throwing down his pipe, Han sat up and gasped:

"You don't say!"

In his flurry, he hoisted himself off the *kang*, his white silk sleeve knocking over the lamp and the oil spilling over the black-lacquered opium-tray. Beads of sweat were breaking out on his forehead and temples. A letter had come from his daughter-in-law's family earlier in the week, describing how a group of land reform workers had come to their village. They were Communists, and they were leading the poor to fleece the rich, seize their land, divide up their houses, and goodness knows what else besides. This letter had prepared Han for what was to happen. "Much do I care if they come for my land and houses!" he thought. "Land can't be blown away by wind, or washed away by water. If you

want my land, you're welcome. When the wheel of fortune turns, I'll say just a word and you'll return me every plot, not a ridge less. As for my house, I would like to know who dares to come through that high black doorway. But I must take care of my movable property. I'll send it to a safe place." As a matter of fact, he had started doing so six days before, using for this purpose his two rubber-tyred carriages, one bound for the county seat and the other for Yimienpo. About half his goods and chattels had been transplanted, but he had not expected that the land reform workers for his village should have come so soon.

"How many?" he asked nervously. "Where are they putting up?"

"About sixteen of them. The whole lot are billeted in the schoolhouse."

Long-neck sat down plump on the edge of the *kang*. Never before had he dared take this liberty, but now, knowing that his services would be needed, he sat coolly down.

"They're armed with guns—automatics and rifles!" he added.

It was some time before Han recovered his composure.

"Keep your eyes skinned."

"I will," Long-neck answered.

The owner of this long neck was Han Shih-tssai, more commonly known as Long-neck Han. He was twenty-seven years old, had a small head on a long neck, and was a crafty customer. He was Han's nephew, and had seen better days but had run through his money by whoring, gambling and smoking opium. When he could no longer afford opium he started taking shots of morphine, until his arms became gnarled with scars of injection and his neck lengthened appreciably. In 1942 he had no money for morphine, and sold his wife to a brothel in Shuangcheng. When his father-in-law protested, he took a knife and cut his own left hand to frighten the old man, then rolled on the ground, howling. The old man had to square him with a fat sum of money.

His wife gone, he took to selling rags and flapjacks, but earned by no means enough to fill his belly and buy morphine. Han Number Six dropped him occasional crumbs and Long-neck became his stooge. The villagers said: "Long-neck Han has a hand in all Han's dirty work."

The uncle cast a sidelong glance at his nephew, and said:

"Don't let them impose on you. They won't last long."

"Of course," responded Long-neck.

"Be on the alert then. Auntie and I are both old. We have one foot in the grave and, when we put both feet in, we can't take our wealth with us. If we want to protect our property, it's for your sake and your cousins'. It's no laughing matter dealing with the Communists. One Chao Shang-chi alone was enough to give the Japanese Kwantung Army¹ no end of trouble." The landlord paused, then asked:

"Are you at all hard up these days?"

"Well," mumbled Long-neck, "I can manage I suppose. But...."

It was not necessary to hear him out. Han called into the inner room:

"Come in here!"

Han's wife appeared. She was a fat woman shaped like a date-stone—thick about the middle and pointed at both ends. She was dressed in a blue silk gown, and sucking at a long-stemmed pipe with a blue jade bowl.

Long-neck rose and greeted her with a slight bow.

While striking a match and relighting the opium lamp, Han asked his wife:

"How much is left of the money sent in by Li Chen-chiang the other day?"

"Not much—just a small balance." She deliberately made the balance much smaller than it was.

"Give it to our nephew."

"Oh, no, don't bother, please, Auntie," said Long-neck hastily. But he made no move to prevent his aunt from going in for the money. Presently she came back with a sheaf of banknotes, which she shoved into the pocket of his dirty white cloth jacket. He thanked her with a bow, and was starting to go, when Han said:

"Going? Tell Li Chen-chiang and Tien Wan-shun to come to see me." After his nephew had left, Han lay down again beside the opium lamp. His wife sat down on the edge of the *kang* and began complaining of the world and human nature, and of this poor relation in particular, who kept coming several times a month for a loan. He was a perpetual drain on them.

¹Japan's crack army stationed in Northeast China since the occupation of the Northeast by Japan. It was annihilated by the Soviet Army in 1945.

"Your nephew keeps on coming, like a weasel to steal chicks. I wonder how that long, lean neck of his can support his brazen face!"

Hearing approaching footfalls in the courtyard, her husband stopped her:

"A fat lot you know! You can see money and nothing else. Go in quick—somebody is coming." She trotted obediently back into the inner room. Meanwhile dogs were barking and geese quacking in the courtyard as an old man in a straw hat and a tattered blue jacket came in. The deep wrinkles on his forehead and about the corners of his eyes denoted the long years of toil and hardship he had gone through. His thin and straggling beard was covered with dirt and dust. He entered the room, hat in hand, approached the *kang*, and addressed the landlord timidly. Han ignored him, as an opium pellet sizzled over the flame of the lamp, emitting a pungent smell. Presently a noise was heard again in the courtyard—somebody was cursing the long-fanged dogs who were barking furiously and rushing at him.

"Blind curs, don't you see who I am?" he shouted, then asked: "Is Mr. Han in?"

"Is that you, Old Li? Come on in," the landlord called out warmly, hastily sitting up.

Li Chen-chiang smiled his way into the room and up to the *kang*, took off his grimy felt hat with its bedraggled brim, and blurted out:

"Sir, at noon today a batch of strangers arrived. They're called a work team. No one knows what they're up to!" Then he turned to the first comer, as if he had just seen him. "Old Tien, you're here too!"

Han picked up a little blue flower-patterned Japanese porcelain teapot, took a drink from its spout, and gave a slight cough. He glanced again at Li and Tien with his beady eyes, then said with deliberation:

"You two had better look for other land. I want that land back."

Thunderstruck, Tien stood rooted to the ground, his right hand nervously gripping his straw hat. Where else could he find another piece of land? And how was he to pay the old debts? He would have to go begging with his wife, who was blind! Li, on the other hand, kept fairly calm, knitting his brows a bit in an effort

to read the landlord's mind. What did Han have up his sleeve? Perhaps he wanted to increase the rent to make up for the higher cost of opium. Or, more likely, he just needed Li's help to deal with the land reform workers. He was merely bluffing then. With a twinkle in his eye, Li smiled and said:

"The land is yours, sir. If you want it back, I agree."

Han suddenly chuckled, slid off the *kang*, and led Li by the hand into the outer room. A whispered conversation passed between them. Tien was left out in the cold, and all he could hear was Li saying, in a gruff voice he couldn't lower,

"Your business is mine. I'll do all I can to help."

Then all was quiet, except for the sound of footsteps in the yard, accompanied by the barking of dogs and quacking of geese. Han re-entered the room, a faint smile lingering around the corners of his mouth; but, seeing Tien still standing there, he abruptly screwed his face into a scowl.

Han had over twenty years' experience of all manner of ways of dealing with tenants and hired hands. His sallow face with its short, Japanese-style whiskers could simulate a smile or spit fire as it suited him, and he could roll his beady eyes menacingly. After meals he often went for a stroll. When a poor man greeted him respectfully, he did not see him. To rich people he was all smiles. But he took no one wholly into his confidence, schooled by the precepts handed down by his ancestors: "When a truth is on your tongue, swallow back half of it." "Tell a different story to different people." Only once, in his cups did he give himself away when he said to his friend Tang Tien:

"To make money, you've got to be five things: hypocritical, cunning, close, tough and heartless."

Now he was lying on the *kang* enjoying his pipe, letting honest Tien cool his heels. At this point Han's wife came in. Her husband tipped her a wink, and she said to the old peasant:

"Old Tien, we hate to take back that land, but it's for your own good. Our soil is poor. If you till another man's land, you'll harvest more."

"Sir, ma'am," implored Tien, wringing his hands, "if you don't let me till your land, I can never—even in my next lifetime—pay back the debts I owe you. I can't find another piece of land—even if I could, the new land would be far away and my old blind horse

couldn't cover the distance. I've always been a good tenant—I've never broken your rules, and always paid up to the last grain. . . ."

Han sat up suddenly and interrupted the tenant with a blunt question:

"A Communist work team has arrived. Do you think that's good?"

"I don't understand, sir. How can we peasants tell whether the work team is good or not?"

Deep down in his heart, Tien knew quite well that the work team were Eighth Route Army men; and five comrades of the Third Battalion of the Eighth Route Army had lived in Tien's hut and had swept the ground and split firewood for him every day. He could not find it in his heart to say that the Communists were no good. Nor dared he offend the landlord by saying that they were good. So he pleaded ignorance. But the landlord insisted:

"You can ride the high horse now."

"You're fond of a joke, sir. What has the work team to do with me?"

Han glared at him, and snapped:

"I'll tell you the truth—they can't stay long. The Kuomintang army will soon cross the river. Your work team may swagger about now with long guns and short guns, but they won't be able to get away fast enough then even if they run like rabbits. We're old neighbours, Old Tien, and I only want to take good care of you. If you want to go on tilling my land, well. . . ."

He paused and stole a glance at the old tenant. Some of his words had struck home. The poor man was, in fact, afraid the work team might not be able to stay long. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead wrinkled with age, toil and misery. "Well," continued Han, "if you want to avoid trouble in future, have nothing to do with the work team. If they ask you any questions, say you don't know anything."

Having reached this point, Han invited Old Tien to sit down. He continued:

"For years we have been together. How can a ladle do without a pot?"

At this point, this landlord remembered what he had done to his old tenant's daughter and was about to say a few words to comfort him on this score, but thought better of it. Actually Old Tien was

thinking of his daughter too and recalling the circumstances which had led to her tragic death. Tears welled up in his eyes, and his mouth quivered, but he tried hard to keep a grip on himself. Taking advantage of Old Tien's weakness, Han wiped the smile off his face, and said coldly:

"If you're so clever, you needn't listen to me. Go ahead and fool about with the work team—we'll see who's right!"

He cut the air with his right hand for emphasis and snorted:

"Time will show! Pah!"

While this final snort was still droning in Old Tien's ears, a voice was heard in the courtyard:

"Is Mr. Han at home?"

Recognizing the voice, Han leapt up and hurried out to receive the guest. In another minute, two men barged in, one fat and one lean. Han tipped the old peasant a wink and the latter left the room. The fat man was Tu Shan-fa otherwise known as Goodman Tu, who was related to Han by marriage. The lean man was Tang Tien commonly known as Snatcher Tang, and he was one of Han's sworn brothers. They were both big landowners, and together with Han were known as the Big Three of Yuanmao. They possessed over ten thousand *mu* of good land, not counting ridges and hills extending from the village to the other side of the river. And they were joint owners of the distillery "Fortune and Virtue."

In disposition as in appearance, Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang were different. The former was a buddhist worshipping a brass Buddha while the latter was a pantheist worshipping the fox and weasel fairies. When Tu's wife fell ill, he would get people to apply the native method of treatment and go to the North Temple to intercede with Buddha. When Tang's wife was indisposed he would invite a witch doctor, and kowtow to the weasel fairy. Goodman Tu was so fat, he panted when he walked. Snatcher Tang told everybody that he was poor, and tried to convince them by unending sighs.

Goodman Tu liked to tell the poor:

"Do good deeds now and you'll be better off in your next life."

Snatcher Tang used to assure small landowners:

"The one hundred and one expenses are grinding me to death. Anyone with land has a hard life of it!"

When Tu and Tang heard that the work team had arrived, they came with one accord to see Han, and soon the whole household was astir. Han's wife and concubine, nephews and nieces all trooped noisily into the room. The men carried on conversation and the women chimed in off and on. Han's youngest son climbed onto Snatcher Tang's back and pounded his shoulders with shouts of laughter.

"Son, get off!" Tang groaned.

"Come down at once," ordered Han's wife, taking her long-stemmed pipe out of her mouth. "Can't you hear your uncle wheezing?"

The curtain over the door rippled as two gorgeous young women stole a look at the guests, their rouged lips projecting beyond the white cloth curtain. One was Han's daughter, Ai-cheng, and the other his daughter-in-law. Under the puppet regime, they had both spent some time in Harbin with Morita Taro, a captain of the Japanese gendarmerie. Both liked to doll themselves up and eye the men. The only difference between them was that Ai-cheng was a wilful girl, and insisted on having more of her own way at home.

Night fell, and the women and children retired to the west wing. Han told his wife to order his bodyguard Li Ching-shan not to allow anyone in the household to talk to members of the work team. The swineherd Wu Chia-fu, in particular, must not be allowed to go to the schoolhouse where they were billeted.

"If he disobeys," said Han, "string him up in the stable."

Having issued these orders, Han sat down beside Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang at the red-lacquered table on the *kang* under a large lamp hanging from the ceiling. Its rays lit up the blue flower-patterned wall-paper, the red-lacquered low table on the *kang*, the ebony ancestral shrine and the faces of the Big Three as they talked. From time to time Han went to the window, parted the flowered curtains, and peered out on the courtyard. It was empty and still under the starlight, with not a soul stirring there. The three landlords talked till midnight, and then the guests rose to go. The host ordered two bright lanterns to be lit, but on second thoughts decided to have them blown out and put back. Out in the dark street, one guest went east and the other west. At both ends of the village dogs started barking furiously. Back in the Han mansion, in the courtyard, in the stable, and under the woodstack,



The curtain over the door rippled as two gorgeous young women stole a look at the guests. . . .

the sound of picks and spades striking against stone and soil could be heard till cock-crow. Along the road, at the crack of dawn, a four-horse rubber-tyred carriage loaded with cases and sacks could be seen speeding to the West Gate. It was the same carriage which had spattered Old Sun all over with mud the day before.

III

AFTER they had taken down their baggage-rolls from the cart and set up telephone wires, the land reform workers began at once to discuss their work. There were no chairs or benches in the school, so they accommodated themselves as best they could, some sitting on the dusty desks and others on their baggage-rolls. Little Wang was perched on the window-sill leaning against the frame, looking out over the highway bisecting the village. On the willows thickly covered with luxuriant dark green foliage sparrows were hopping from twig to twig and chirping shrilly. Swallows floated down from the sky, alighted on the telephone wire and began pluming their wet downy breasts. A group of children were playing hide-and-seek in the meadow across the road. Seeing a stranger sitting in the window of the schoolhouse, they ran through the willow grove, and in less than no time had swarmed up to the window. One of them pressed his nose against the windowpane until it was flat, and, with a grimace, looked up at Little Wang inside. When the latter suddenly flung open the window, the children scampered back through the willows and fled in all directions. The smallest of them, who was stark naked, tripped over a stone and started crying. Little Wang ran over to pick him up, and wiped his tears. Meanwhile the others stopped, turned and started singing:

*Two crabs escape,
Two lobsters swim away,
A water-melon cracks,
Ai-yoh! Ai-yoh!*

By the time Little Wang had ensconced himself in the window frame again, the discussion was underway. It was being debated whether a mass meeting should be called at once as the first step in their work in the village—or whether local conditions should be studied and local people contacted beforehand. Liu Sheng was for

a mass meeting. Team Leader Hsiao Hsiang thought not many people would come to a meeting, and that therefore they had better wait until they had studied local conditions.

"If we don't hold a meeting first," retorted Liu Sheng, "how can we expect the villagers to know what we're here for? And how can we study them?" As he spoke, he took off his glasses and wiped them with the hem of his blue jacket.

"I think the villagers will know that soon enough," said Hsiao Hsiang. "But I don't think by calling a mass meeting the moment we've arrived we'll really learn much about conditions. They'll merely be listening while you talk. When you suggest something, they'll all say, 'We agree.' But do you think they'll really agree? I doubt it. Chinese society is extremely complex, and peasants, who live scattered in the villages under the influence of feudal institutions of thousands of years' standing, can hardly be expected to trust you straight away. They won't take you into their confidence and tell you what they really think until you've mixed with them and won their hearts."

Liu Sheng turned red, and asked him:

"Do you mean to say that when we tell the people at a meeting that we want them to tackle the pot-bellies and stand on their own feet, they'll merely say 'We agree' and then disagree in their hearts?"

Hsiao thought that Liu Sheng was trying to pick faults and misinterpreting his meaning. Annoyed, he snapped:

"When did I suggest such a thing?"

He was about to say something sarcastic, but thought better of it. He was a Party member and leader of the work team and as such ought to be patient. Besides, very likely he had not made his ideas altogether clear. He continued peaceably:

"I mean to say—as we're complete strangers here, before they get to know us the villagers won't tell us their conditions straight out, even though they do hate the pot-bellies deep down in their hearts. And they're not sure whether the pot-bellies can really be beaten. They're not conscious yet of their own power and not sure how long we'll be able to stay. Furthermore, we may be sure that bad eggs are spreading all sorts of rumours against us."

The discussion continued. Some sided with Liu, some with Hsiao while some proposed that a small, informal meeting should

be called instead of a mass meeting. Finally a vote was taken, and Liu Sheng was victorious by one vote.

In high spirits Liu went off to get Old Sun to call all the villagers for a meeting. The carter sounded a big brass gong from one end of the village to the other, calling out:

"There's a meeting at the schoolhouse. One person from each family."

Towards evening, not long after the tenant Li Chen-chiang had left Han's house and while the three landlords were closeted together under the lamplight, villagers came to the mass meeting in twos and threes and stood scattered in the playing-field under the starlight. Most of them were old men and children. Liu Sheng mounted a table and, after some preliminaries, he said:

"We want to rise up together and stand on our own feet. Down with the pot-bellies! We poor men must take the power into our own hands and arm ourselves." He carried his speech a little further and then concluded it with a question:

"Do you agree to tackle the pot-bellies here?"

"Yes" came from a dozen voices.

"I agree." This was from an old man with a white beard. He turned around and grinned at Li Chen-chiang, who was standing behind him.

"Who are the pot-bellies of this village?" asked Liu.

A prolonged silence ensued.

"Why don't you speak up?" Liu turned to the old man with the white beard, the one who had said, "I agree," and said: "You tell us, uncle."

"I haven't been here long enough—I came to this village only after the Japanese surrender in 1945." Li Chen-chiang, who was standing behind him, muttered something over his shoulder, and White Goatee continued: "I hear there are no big landlords in this village, and I believe it's true."

"Then why did you say just now that you agreed we should tackle the pot-bellies?" asked Liu.

"There aren't any here," explained White Goatee, "but there are plenty in other villages. We can attack them."

"Comrade, can I say something?" put in another old man in a black felt hat. "From time immemorial man has bent to the law as grass bends under the wind. Whatever the government

says goes. Our land reform workers here represent our government. When they say they'll fight the pot-bellies to help us poor folks come up on top, of course we're pleased." He turned to the audience and asked: "Do you agree, folks?"

Cries of approval came from every side, the voices of old men and children intermingling. There was a burst of applause too.

"Comrades, you've heard with your own ears we all welcome you," went on the old man in the black hat. "It's nearly midnight now, and time the meeting broke up. Please don't be offended if I go home now to sleep. Tomorrow morning I must make mud-bricks to repair the *kang*. If I don't repair it, the stove underneath it won't burn and there'll be all smoke and no fire—the *kang* will be icy cold all through the winter and that old woman of mine will shiver and chatter from dark to dawn, and lose her sleep. . . ."

"What's that got to do with this meeting?" said someone else. "Your *kang*-repairing can wait."

Another fellow caught up mischievously:

"Whether your old woman can sleep or not is none of the work team's business."

Guffaws of merriment ensued, amid which White Goatee edged out, nudged the old man in the black hat on the back, and egged him on:

"Go if you want to. What are you waiting for?"

No sooner had Black Hat left than White Goatee announced: "Comrades, you must excuse me, but I must go home now. First thing tomorrow morning, I've got to go and see my married daughter, who's got a sore eye." The example set by the two elders was immediately followed by all. Everybody had got urgent business for the next day. A peasant was going to dig up potatoes. A carter had to shoe his horse. Another carter had to cut grass. Someone else declared that his wife was lying in and he had to get up to cook before daybreak. One after another they invented excuses and walked out.

"Blockheads!" muttered Old Sun. But when nobody was looking he slipped away himself.

Liu Sheng went into the classroom and sank down on a baggage-roll in one corner, resting his face on his upturned palms and his elbows on his drawn-up knees.

"What an unexpected fiasco!" he said at last.

"I wouldn't call it unexpected," seeing how downcast Liu was, Team Leader Hsiao tried to cheer him up in a soothing voice. "This result is just what was to be expected. However, it's all to the good. At least we've discovered that conditions aren't so simple in this village as we thought, and things can't be done in a hurry."

The land reform workers sat down to discuss what they should do next. This time they easily agreed upon a course of action—early next morning they would go out to find poor men, to discover the active ones among them and gather information about the landlords of the village, in order to decide which to tackle.

IV

AT the crack of dawn, while cocks far and near were still crowing, the land reform workers set out one after another. There were fifteen of them altogether. Section Leader Chang and his ten men carried rifles; the other four—Team Leader Hsiao, Liu Sheng, Little Wang and Hsiao's orderly Wan Chien—carried Mausers. They had got up in the small hours, and breakfasted on boiled water and dry rations. They were out to strike up acquaintances with poor men, agreeing to return to the schoolhouse by evening to exchange information. Each brought with him some money to pay for a meal if invited to eat in the house visited.

Little Wang visited several families in the north end, then went to the south end where he came upon a naked child playing outside a wicket-gate. On a closer look, he recognized him as the child who had fallen down the day before. Little Wang took the boy up in his arms, and asked:

"What's your name?"

"My name is So-chu!" The child began playing with the pink tassel of Little Wang's Mauser.

"What's your age?"

"Mummy says I'm five. Daddy says I'll be old enough to be a swineherd in another year or two. Daddy isn't as good as Mummy—he often shouts at me. One day he said: 'I can't feed you—you'd better get out.' I said: 'I won't. I want to be with Mummy. Why don't you get out?' Daddy slapped me on the face."

"Where's your father? Is he in?"

"See? Isn't he there?"

A man, stripped to the waist, had just pushed open the dilapidated latticed door of a thatched hut, and come out. He was standing in the courtyard with a short-stemmed pipe in his hand. He was about thirty-two years old, medium-sized, neither plump nor thin; the most conspicuous thing about him was a thick, inky beard. This was Chao Yu-lin, also known as Bare Bottom Chao. He had a wife and a son, but had no means to feed and clothe them. It was a choice between the belly and the back: If Chao was to fill the one, he could not cover the other. Thus he, his wife, and son had no clothes to wear. In winter the three of them stayed glued to the *kang*, only getting up to fetch fuel and water and to cook. In summer, when the crops were shoulder high, Chao's wife slipped out to the fields to work before it was light, and only came back after dark. None of the villagers knew her secret. One day, however, as she was weeding, she heard shouting, and when she stood up to see what was the matter her naked shoulders were seen. Soon Mrs. Chao's nakedness became the talk of the village, and Chao was given the nickname Bare Bottom. In 1945, when the Soviet Red Army men bivouacked in the village, this came to their ears, and they gave the family two army uniforms, so at last they had clothes to wear, and could invite friends to their hut.

"Come on in, comrade," Chao said to Little Wang. Little Wang, carrying the child in his arms, followed the man into his hut. A woman, clad in a khaki shirt, was plaiting reeds into a hat. Seeing the visitor, she laid aside her work and was about to glide off the *kang*, when Little Wang said:

"Please don't get down." He deposited the boy on the *kang* and sat down on the edge himself, then took the pipe offered him by his host and began puffing at it, the yellowish smoke curling up and spreading about the room. Little Wang had the knack of making himself at home with poor villagers. He engaged Chao in conversation about tobacco and grain. At first the peasant just listened, nodding his head now and then or mumbling a brief reply. Then he realized that Little Wang knew a good deal about farming, and thought to himself:

"He must be from a peasant family too."

The ice was broken and they talked freely. Even the woman put in a word or two.

"How many maize plants can be grown on ten *mou* of land around here?" asked Little Wang.

"Around twelve thousand stalks—from good land nearly nine piculs of maize can be had, but from a dry plot only about three or four piculs," answered Chao. "The soil around here is fertile all right, but we must take good care of it, of course. 'If man is diligent, soil is not idle.' How true the proverb is! If you weed while the sun shines, then, after a good rain, the plants fairly shoot up—you can almost see them grow. By autumn they've filled out with fat and solid grain."

"Are you going down to the fields today?" Little Wang was afraid that he was keeping the peasant from his work.

"No. The second weeding is over. Today I'll grind paddy."

"Fine—let's go together!" Little Wang picked up a basket sieve from the *kang*.

They went together to see a neighbour by the name of Liu Teh-shan to borrow his grindstone, and set about turning it together. They talked as they turned. Chao was just chatting at random. Little Wang wanted to get to know this peasant, his family and history, and through him find out more about the village. Chao could not help warming up to Little Wang, who had been a farm-hand himself, and who therefore knew all about farming and could get on well with peasants.

Little Wang came from Hulan County north of the Sungari. His father had been a training officer in the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies of the Northeast¹ under the command of the famous General Chao Shang-chih. He had also been, it was said, secretary of one of the district branches of the Party. In the winter of 1933, he was tracked down by the puppet Manchukuo police and beaten within an inch of his life, but he refused to divulge any information or give anybody away. He was rammed into a sack, like over three hundred other soldiers of the Anti-Japanese Armies. They were hoisted up a cliff, then thrown down, so that the blood and brains of the victims inside spilled out and congealed on the sacks. It was snowing that night when two Japanese lorries carried these sacks to the frozen Sungari River, made a hole in the ice and dumped the sacks one after another into the river.

¹ A people's force organized by the Communist Party of China after the Japanese imperialists occupied Northeast China in 1931.

Little Wang was only five at the time. When he was seven, the puppet Manchukuo police started rounding up more patriots. The Wangs had lost contact with the Anti-Japanese Armies, and become refugees. His uncle went south to the other side of the Great Wall, while his mother and he trudged west. For several years they wandered homeless and hungry in the wind and the rain. At eleven, Wang hired himself out to a landlord in Paichengtzu as a swineherd. Two years later, he was—to use his own words—“promoted to the status of groom.” At sixteen, he was doing a grown man’s work on the land; but because he was small in stature he received only half pay.

Little Wang could never forget one August day the year when he, a little boy of seven, and his mother were trudging west along the highway under a blazing sun, with no human habitation in sight. Suddenly inky clouds gathered in the southwestern sky and dissolved into a downpour, blackening heaven and earth. Far away, a huge gloomy pall woven of shafts of rain seemed suspended from heaven to earth like the legendary dragon’s beard. In a flash a tearing wind, laden with moisture, had carried over rain clouds flickering with lightning and rumbling with thunder. Little Wang’s mother staggered along on her small bound feet. There was no shelter anywhere, and soon they were sopping wet. At long last they came upon a roadside shrine and crawled into it, soaked to the skin. The boy’s teeth were chattering, and as his mother hugged him tightly in her arms, her tears dropped on his upturned face.

“Oh! Mummy!”

“Child,” said his mother, wiping his tears and her own, “when you’re grown up, don’t forget how they killed your father.”

When he was sixteen years old he gave his mother every cent of his half pay. That year she succumbed to tuberculosis. Ever since they became refugees, she had suffered untold hardships, struggling against all adversities to bring up her son. She was bound-footed and illiterate but had all the virtues of the old Chinese women. For nine whole years she had not had a single square meal or a single warm jacket. As she was dying, her mind was clear, and with tears in her eyes she enjoined her son once more:

“Son, when you’re grown up, don’t forget—how they killed—your father!”

Little Wang had never for a moment forgotten his father’s



They went together to see a neighbour by the name of Liu Teh-shan to borrow his grindstone, and set about turning it together. They talked as they turned.

tragic death and his mother's tears. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, he joined the United Democratic Army.¹ One day he received a letter from his uncle who had gone south of the Great Wall, saying that he had joined the Eighth Route Army. In July 1946, when the Northeast Bureau of the Communist Party of China called for twelve thousand cadres to embark upon mass work in the countryside, Wang answered the call and was attached to a work team under the leadership of Hsiao Hsiang. Completely illiterate, he was given the opportunity to take an eight-month course in character-learning, as a result of which he could now call himself "half-literate."

Little Wang and Chao continued to push the grindstone till noon, when they stopped and went back to the latter's home for lunch. After lunch, Little Wang had a smoke and then followed Chao to the vegetable plot. The peasant tilled a piece of land belonging to Han Number Six; but, after paying the rent in kind, he and his family could scarcely live off it, so he rented from Goodman Tu a vegetable plot, on which he grew beans, egg-plants, pumpkins, shallots, cucumbers, potatoes and sunflowers. They all grew well, and he gave part of the yield to the landlord in payment of the rent, sold part for cash, and kept the rest for home consumption. During the spring and summer, when their supply of grain had run out, the family lived on peas and potatoes. His vegetable plot was well kept, without a wisp of weed on it. Lately a storm had damaged the trellis-work on which the cucumbers and beans were climbing. As they fixed up the trellises and put back the vines, they talked. At first Chao spoke only about other people, but later he told Little Wang the following story about himself:

"In 1932, there was a famine in Shantung, the province I come from, and I left home to try my luck on this side of the Great Wall. When I arrived here, the puppet police wouldn't let me settle down on my own, because I had no papers, so I hired myself out to Han. I wanted to be paid my yearly wages in a lump sum so that it could be put to some use, but the landlord doled it out in seven or eight instalments. Late in autumn, I had no money left to buy what I needed. At the end of the year he

¹ Part of the Eighth Route Army which was sent to Northeast China under the command of General Lin Piao after the Japanese surrender in 1945 and which was later called the Fourth Field Army of the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

said that I had overdrawn my wages by one hundred dollars, and I had to pay it back by giving him a blue jacket I had brought from Shantung. The next year my mother and wife came from home to join me here. They had something left from their travelling expenses, on the strength of which I quitted the Han house and rented a piece of land as a tenant farmer. Unfortunately, just at the time of the first weeding the puppet government conscripted me for labour; and while I was in the labour camp, my farm ran to seed. The conscription was repeated four times on end, the fourth time being the worst. We worked twenty days and nights with practically no sleep. We had two meals a day of some indigestible stuff which swelled the stomach to bursting. Many, many were starved and frozen to death—how many no one knows." Chao raised his head and looked at Little Wang. "Comrade Wang, as if I had nine lives, I survived all that and came back. But I found my mother had died and my wife and boy had gone begging. I went in search of them and when finally I found them, mother and child cried so much that they couldn't speak. I didn't cry, Comrade Wang. If we poor men cried over our misfortunes, we might get drowned in our tears."

Little Wang's own eyes were moist. After a pause, he asked:

"You mentioned the Han house. Do you mean Han Number Six?"

The peasant nodded.

"How much land does he have?"

"I'm not sure." He looked round and, while binding some cucumber vines to the trellis, added: "In this village alone, the whole stretch of flat land outside the South Gate belongs to him—around two thousand *mu*, at least. He has many more holdings in other villages."

"What kind of man is Han Number Six?" Little Wang looked through the vines and leaves to see how Chao reacted.

"Han? People say: 'He never does any good, and never stops doing evil.'" Chao's face, framed in the foliage, was pale, and wrinkles looked like a spider's web around the corners of his eyes.

The two of them continued their hobnobbing throughout the afternoon. Now and then the peasant looked over the trellis-work overgrown with cucumber leaves and yellow blossoms to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, although their whispering was

scarcely more audible than the droning of the bees hovering over the vines. Chao told Little Wang all he knew about Han Number Six.

Han was not particularly rich in 1932 when the puppet Manchukuo regime was established by the Japanese military in North-east China, but later he began making money hand over fist, and purchased every year large strips of land in this village, in Harbin and in Chiamuzu. He held most of the shares of the distillery "Fortune and Virtue." In 1933 he was made village head, and, to serve his Japanese superiors faithfully, he often went about carrying a stout cane in his hand, collecting taxes, commandeering pigskins, pigblood and black currant leaves. After two years as village head, he had prospered so much he could retire to enjoy a comfortable life. He invited a Japanese gendarme officer by the name of Morita Taro to live in his mansion. Some said that the Japanese fell in love with Han's daughter, some with his daughter-in-law, and others that the lusty fellow was carrying on with both women at the same time. The poor neighbours had no way of knowing exactly what went on behind that high wall. Han's stooges watched over his tenants, and who wanted to court disaster by mentioning his affairs? Nevertheless, everybody could see that the Japanese officer's presence in his house increased his power over all the village. He had a free hand in forcing peasants to work for him—they fetched water, split firewood, thatched roofs, repaired *kang*, erected trellises for him for nothing. He transferred the paid labourers to his distillery. Once he got the poor neighbours to sink a well outside the gate of his mansion on the understanding that the well was for public use. But when they went to draw water from it, they were shooed away by his handy man Li Ching-shan. Thus the public well became his private well. Only those whom he wanted to favour could share it. One day the neighbours went in a body to see him about the well, but Li stopped them at the gate. Then they saw a bald head sticking out of the window and heard a stern voice asking:

"Who are there? What do they want?"

"We came to see Mr. Han about the well. We've sunk it," ventured a man standing at the head of the group, Old Chang, in a meek voice and with a grin.

"Can you show me a certificate?" The landlord rolled his

beady eyes furiously. The poor men had never before heard of such a thing as a well certificate. Where could they find one?

"Don't you remember we've sunk the well, sir?" Old Chang tried once more to reason with him.

"On whose ground is the well?"

Old Chang was on the point of answering again, when Morita, the Japanese gendarme officer, rushed out, brandishing a whip in his hand, and lashed out at their heads. They quickly retreated. The next day Old Chang was drafted off to a labour camp in Laoheh Hill from where he never returned. So it was finally proved beyond a doubt that the poor neighbours had no right to drink from the well which they had sunk with their own hands. Han Number Six then made a ruling that those who worked for him two or three days every month without eating a meal in his house or wanting a cent from him were welcome to the well. Thereby he saved a great deal in wages every year.

Han had a stable and kept over twenty horses in it, all fat and strong. About harvest time every year he had them let out to graze on the land adjoining his, where they could crop the ripening grain. It broke your heart to see your paddy and kaoliang eaten up like that just when you were so near reaping them. But you dared not breathe a word of protest. So every year there were peasants who abandoned their farms rather than argue with the landlord.

"Neighbour, why don't you work your farm?" Han would ask, and his neighbour would be at a loss what to say. The landlord would graciously offer his help, saying:

"If you can't afford the expenses, I'll take care of your farm for one or two years." Then he had the farm ploughed and sown and squatted down on it. If you said that you were the owner of the land, he would ask you to produce a title-deed, knowing quite well that you had none. But he, of course, had had one made out ready. He had forged it with the help of his elder brother who was an agent in the employ of the Japanese police. Thus poor people toiled and moiled to win a few *mou* of wasteland, only to see it fall into his hands. His land holdings extended east to the hills and west to what had been the territory of the Japanese military land-reclamation corps. Speaking of the Japanese corps, they also helped Han to make his fortune.

Old Sung of the west end took out a licence from the Japanese corps to reclaim twenty *mou* of wasteland and sowed it to hemp. The hemp was nearly ripe when Han's son, who could speak Japanese, arrived with a Japanese officer in tow. They pointed here and there at the land, and Old Sung could not understand a word they were saying.

Walking up to them, he asked with a nervous smile: "What do you gentlemen want?"

"We are going to enclose all the territory around here," snapped the landlord's son, jerking up his head.

"But the hemp is ripening. What shall I do?"

"Take it that you've grown the hemp for love." With this he stalked off with the Japanese officer. So Old Sung's land was taken over by Han's son, who came to reap the hemp in the autumn. The poor peasant had to sell his horse to buy hemp for the payment of the tax in kind.

At sunset, Chao Yu-lin and Little Wang finished fixing up the trellises. The peasant picked some peas, cucumbers, and shallots, and rammed them into the hollow of his upturned straw-hat. They walked homewards over the balks intersecting the fields, all the while talking in low voices.

"There's no end to the stories about him," Chao whispered. "He'd only to send word to Morita Taro to have someone killed. Plenty of people were killed in the village that way. In those days the black doorway of his mansion was the gate to hell. Nobody dared to enter that gate. When you had the bad luck to see him in the distance bearing down upon you, you would dodge quickly into a lane—if it was too late for that, you would wait respectfully at the side of the road until he had passed. If you greeted him, he would glare at you with a snarl. Fairly sent chills down your spine! Well, here we are—home."

"After you, after you." Chao followed Little Wang into the house.

The supper table was set with a dish of boiled peas and raw cucumbers and shallots.

"Help yourself, please. There's plenty in the pot." Little Wang liked the peas and the host gave him one helping after another. "Comrade Wang, we're doing better now than last year. Things were pretty bad last year." Chao bit off a fat stick of shallot

dipped in sauce. "If the Communists had come later than they did, we might have starved to death long ago."

After supper, the guest rose to go, his face flushed with youth and health.

"Let me walk a little way with you," said his host.

As they walked Little Wang explained to Chao why and how the poor people should fight landlords and local despots and emancipate themselves.

"Which of the landlords of this village should we deal with first?" Little Wang asked.

"Who do you say?" the peasant parried with a grin.

"If we tackle him, dare you join in?"

"Dare I join in? The devil himself couldn't stop me!"

Little Wang gripped his hand tightly, and exclaimed: "Good, very good! 'A brave fellow is as good as his word, a swift horse needs no spurring.' We'll discuss it again tomorrow, and get other people in on this. Good night."

When Chao got home his wife was washing the dishes, while So-chu was playing on the *kang*. Seeing his father, he jumped down and ran up to him with open arms. Papa was in a better humour. That guest must have cheered him up. Papa hadn't beaten him today. He stroked his father's inky beard and told him triumphantly that he had caught a grasshopper that evening and meant to catch another the next day. He had seen ever so many fish in the river. Old Chu's drag-net had been lifted by some rascal, and Old Liu had caught a basketful of fish with a fishing net—trout, dogfish and what not!

"Papa, shall we go fishing tomorrow, too?"

"Didn't you say you were going to catch grasshoppers tomorrow?"

Little So-chu could not keep his eyes open. Before he could give an answer, he fell asleep on his father's chest. Chao laid the boy gently down on the *kang* and covered his naked body with a tattered jacket. His wife came in and sat down.

"The firewood is running out," she said, casting Chao a look. She had shared untold hardships with him without ever letting fall a word of complaint. She was a little woman with a heart of gold.

"Tomorrow I'll be busy. You'd better burn rushes for a while."

Chao stepped into the yard, smoking his pipe. His wife lay down alongside her boy and soon began dozing off. Chao stepped back into the room, sat down on the edge of the *kang*, leaned against the wall, refilled his pipe, and puffed and puffed at it. He was recalling bitter memories of the wrongs Han Number Six had done him during the years past.

Three years before, to avoid being drafted for labour again, he had gone hiding in a pine grove, but Han came to know this and told Morita, the Japanese gendarme officer, who tracked him down and threw him into prison. Three months later he was sent to a labour camp in Yenshou. Then last year he was three days behindhand in rent and, to punish him, Han made him kneel on creaks, which cut into his flesh until the blood oozed out, reddened the bowls and spilled over the ground. The pain was like a knife turning in his heart!

Now the work team had come to deal with this enemy of his, this son of a bitch! He felt elated. He lay down on the *kang*, and puffed at his pipe in the best of spirits.

"But is it possible, really? Is it as easy as Comrade Wang seems to believe to knock Han out?" This question suddenly flashed into his mind. He turned over to this side and that and thought and thought. Sleep would not come. He got up, groped for his pipe, stepped into the kitchen, raked out a cinder, lighted his pipe, squatted down beside the stove, and began smoking. To the accompaniment of the sizzling pipe, his mind was buzzing. Han had great power and influence. His elder brother was still in hiding in some other province, his younger brother commanded a band of bandits in the mountains, and his son was with the Kuomintang reactionaries in Changchun; while the village swarmed with his kith and kin, sworn brothers and underlings.

"Just suppose they can't pull it off!" he thought.

But then he seemed to hear Little Wang's voice asking: "Brother Chao, are you afraid?" And in his mind's eye he could see the young comrade's grinning round face.

"Why should I be afraid?" the peasant parried, feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself and at the same time recovering his courage at the thought of Little Wang.

"If a young fellow like Comrade Wang isn't afraid, why should I be? He says there are millions of the Eighth Route Army and

the United Democratic Army on either side of the Great Wall, all armed with the best weapons. He says too that all poor men in the world have the same surname—POOR—so all poor men are brothers. Sure enough, there are plenty of poor in the world. Tomorrow I'll rally some fellows, and we'll see whether Han is able to get the better of us!" He seemed to see the landlord standing before him, narrowing his beady eyes menacingly. Chao flared up. "Nothing will satisfy us but your death!" He rapped his pipe hard against the stove.

"Why don't you come to bed? It'll be light soon," his wife called to him after waking up. He went in, hearing the cock in the yard flapping its wings and crowing its first round. When the cock was crowing its third round, up he woke and off he went to see the land reform workers, stripped to the waist as usual, his tattered straw-hat on his head. At the schoolhouse he found Little Wang lying on a desk, his bed, and rubbing his eyes. Seeing the peasant, Little Wang slipped off the desk and went out with him for a walk outside. Chao described to him all the tangle of thoughts that had passed through his mind during the night. In conclusion, he declared:

"I see my way clear now, and I'll fight him to the finish even if I've to die fighting."

"Carry the revolution to a successful finish." Little Wang emended cheerfully.

"Yes! 'A brave fellow is as good as his word, a swift horse needs no spurring.'" Chao remembered the proverb Little Wang had quoted. Then the two friends set off together to look for other poor villagers.

V

As Team Leader Hsiao walked out of the schoolhouse to visit some of the poor villagers, he came upon a middle-aged fellow drawing water from a well by the roadside. This man greeted him with a smile, and Hsiao smiled back. The villager was in a tattered blue jacket. He had broad muscular shoulders and strong gnarled hands. "This is a peasant," Hsiao thought, and stepping closer he asked:

"May I know your name?"

"My name is Liu, Liu Teh-shan." Then, with a smile, he asked Hsiao to his house. Carrying two bucketfuls of water suspended from a pole over his shoulder, the peasant stepped briskly along the road towards the north end, and Team Leader Hsiao walked by his side.

"Comrade Team Leader, I like anybody who is called comrade," Liu began as he toted his dripping load. "Not long ago the Third Battalion of the United Democratic Army came to this village to drive out the bandits. A section stayed for a time in my house. Every morning they fetched water, split firewood, swept the courtyard for us. The other day, when you comrades arrived at our village, Old Hsiung's wife, who lives in the west wing in the same courtyard with us, was scared and stowed away a fat black hen in a wooden box. As luck would have it, the hen laid an egg inside the box and started clucking and cackling to let everyone know. The hen kept it up so long, her mistress was frantic. 'Wait a minute,' I said, 'while I go and find out what's happening.' I went out, ran back, and gasped: 'Quick! Kill your hen and eat her! The soldiers are out snatching chickens!' She believed me, and had just picked up a knife to kill the hen, when I told her again: 'I was joking! The soldiers aren't Chiang Kai-shek's bandits. They're soldiers of the United Democratic Army. They wouldn't take your hen as a gift.'"

While listening to this story, Team Leader Hsiao thought to himself: "This man sounds all right, but I must get to know more about him."

Liu had a roomy house and a wooden-floored stable in which three strong and fat horses were eating mash. The north wing looked pretty new, and there was a window with a big glass pane in the east wing. Hsiao mentally classified the owner as a well-to-do middle peasant. He hesitated to step inside, thinking that he only wanted to get acquainted with poor peasants and farmhands. But since he was already there, he decided: "No harm chatting with him for a while. Perhaps I should learn about every stratum of peasants."

He followed Liu into the east wing, sat down on the *kang*, smoked a cigarette, and drank a cup of rice tea. The host gathered

plums from a tree in his garden, placed them on the low-legged table, and asked the guest to help himself. As he talked, he chose topics which would please Team Leader Hsiao, avoiding those which might give offence. He paused now and then and looked at his interlocutor to see how he was reacting, and if he saw any sign of displeasure on Hsiao's face, he immediately changed the subject. While the team leader was speaking, he kept nodding his head and said nothing but "Yes, you're right. Of course, that's so. It goes without saying."

Liu was a good hand at ploughing, sowing, setting up trellises, stacking wheat in sheaves, or any of the jobs about a farm. He had been poor too to begin with. When the Japanese surrendered, all those with horses rushed to grab Japanese military stocks. Liu harnessed up his small cart too, and carted a load of stuff all the way from the villages in the Japanese reclamation area: clothes and quilts, sacks of flour and rice, pots and pans, bowls and dishes. He had come across a dozen Japanese rifles but had not dared take them.

But, when Han Number Six was setting up an armed unit, he insisted that Liu had taken a Japanese rifle, and made him surrender all his Japanese goods. He was allowed to keep only one thing—a greatcoat which he had shortened and blackened. So Liu bore the landlord a grudge, but he took care not to show it—he was afraid he would come off the worse in any dispute with Han.

The arrival of the work team at the village was welcome news to him. He secretly hoped that Han would get it hot from them. But scarcely had his hopes risen, before his heart sank on account of his own property. The land reform workers were Communists, and as such would they allow him to keep his three horses and fifty *mou* of land? Hardly likely. Yes, they might be foes to Han Number Six, but they could not be reckoned as friends to him, Liu Teh-shan. After an anxious, sleepless night he decided his best course was to offend nobody, to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, and to wait and see which way the wind blew.

The conversation with Liu not being very fruitful, Team Leader Hsiao returned to the schoolhouse before noon, a little earlier than the other comrades. He jotted down in his pocket-book these remarks:

"Liu Teh-shan, middle-aged well-to-do middle peasant, wavering, but may be won over."

Hardly had he put the notebook back into his breast pocket when a big fellow with his hair parted in the middle and thick, shaggy eyebrows, clad in a white jacket, barged in, made a bow, and asked:

"Is Team Leader Hsiao in?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?" said Team Leader Hsiao, sizing up the new-comer.

The big fellow held up a red invitation card with both hands and repeated his bow.

"My name is Li Ching-shan. My master sends you his greetings and hopes that you'll be so kind as to come to dinner. That would be a great honour for him."

Hsiao glanced at the cover of the red card which had on it a Japanese form of address. Then he turned to the inside page which read:

"Having prepared a humble meal, I beg you to honour me with your presence at six o'clock on the evening of the sixteenth." Under this was Han's signature.

In smaller characters at the side was written:

"Place—my humble abode."

Team Leader Hsiao glanced at the Japanese form of address on the front once more, and commented with a smile:

"So, even the invitation card is Japanese style! Who else is your master inviting?"

"Nobody else. Only Team Leader Hsiao." Li Ching-shan fingered the Japanese buttons on his jacket and made a third bow.

"What delicacies is your master preparing?"

"In a poor, out-of-the-way village like this, what delicacies do we have? It's just a friendly gesture."

"What do you mean?"

"You've come to this village to serve the people. My master's prepared a little home-brewed wine to welcome you."

"What are you doing at his place?"

"One of his hired farmhands—digging and dragging."

"Nonsense! Who do you want to deceive? Does a digger-and-dragger dress and speak like you?" The team leader's eye

fell on his parted hair again and he flared up. He tore the red card in two and then into shreds and flung them into the body-guard's face, one bit hitting him in the eye. The veins on Li's forehead swelled, and he glared furiously. He retreated a step or two, his left arm akimbo, his feet spread apart, his right hand clenched in a fist, looking ready to do battle.

"What d'you think you're doing here? Want a fight?" Wan, Hsiao's orderly, put one hand to his gun and shoved Li in the chest with the other. "Get the hell out of here."

The sight of Wan, sturdy and armed with an automatic, frightened Li and he backed out, muttering: "All right, I'm going." He waddled out, crestfallen and smouldering. Wan walked him to the gate, spat on the ground, and swore:

"Dirty lackey, come again if you dare!"

At this moment, Old Sun happened to be passing by the school-house, leading two horses. He asked Wan:

"Who have you been quarrelling with?"

Wan pointed a finger at the retreating figure of Li Ching-shan and said that that fellow had come with an invitation from Han Number Six but had just been sent off with a flea in his ear. Old Sun winked and asked with a grin:

"An invitation? Refused? I'd go if I were you!"

"After eating the mouth is sealed," said Wan.

"Not necessarily. Your mouth's your own, you can open or close it as you like. If anyone invited me, I'd certainly go. After I'd eaten my fill I need only wipe my mouth clean. I wouldn't let the meal influence me."

"Right you are! The next time some pot-belly invites Team Leader Hsiao, I'll suggest that you go and eat for him."

"Enough of that," Old Sun said, with another wink, coming closer and lowering his voice. "Now this is serious. Tell Team Leader Hsiao that late last night in and outside the West Gate dogs were barking. That means somebody was moving his property out of the village."

"Who?" asked Wan.

"Who do you think?" the carter answered, pointing to the towering roof of the Han mansion. The next minute he was off, taking his horses to the well to water.

VI

TEAM Leader Hsiao worked feverishly night and day. Having used up the limited supply of candles he had brought with him from the district, he was working away by the flickering light from a bean-oil lamp, studying information relating to the villagers. He knew that in order to complete the work for their emancipation and other tasks of the Party, it was essential to have an objective knowledge about people and things. He must not bungle like a man who "tries to catch sparrows blindfold" and only succeeds in running his head against the wall.

They had a good deal of material now on Han Number Six. The work team had made friends with a number of the poor men in the village, including carters with and without horses. They had all promised to come one evening—not necessarily to attend a formal meeting but just to chat together.

They arrived by twos and threes. Liu Teh-shan, who was one of the first to come, was standing by the window and talking about his experience with the Third Battalion.

When Old Sun showed up he immediately drew a crowd to himself. In the dim light of the bean-oil lamp, he began to entertain the friends clustering around him with a story about a bear:

"He was black all over, that beast, and tremendously strong. He hugged the trunk of a big pine, gave it a shake and a pull, and up it came root and branch. One day a tiger wanted a match of strength with him and he accepted the challenge. After the first round both were panting and perspiring. Fearing defeat, the tiger suggested: 'Let's have a pause.'"

"Did you watch the fight with your own eyes?" chimed in somebody among the interested crowd.

Old Sun merely narrowed his left eye to a slit. He thought it unnecessary to reply.

"The bear answered: 'I agree.' So the tiger wandered off. But the bear, instead of resting or getting something to eat, started clearing the wood for a good arena—he went and pulled up all the big and small trees until nothing was left standing around him. Meanwhile, the tiger ate, drank, and rested. Refreshed, the cunning animal came back and demanded another round without a moment's delay. Tired and hungry though he was, the bear agreed.

It was a tie. Exhausted, the tiger said again: 'How about another pause?' He didn't say 'rest,' mind you, only 'pause,' for fear the correct word might put the bear wise and make him want a rest too. The bear answered: 'As you like—I've no objection.' Then the tiger left to eat, drink, and rest a second time, while the bear enlarged the clearing by uprooting more trees. After a while the tiger bounded back, defeated the bear in next to no time, and devoured him."

Meanwhile more villagers had straggled into the schoolhouse. Chao was sitting on a desk in the middle of the room, drawing at his short-stemmed pipe till the bowl sizzled.

"Have you finished your story?" Team Leader Hsiao asked Old Sun.

"Finished," Old Sun answered, screwing up his left eye. "You go ahead."

"Very well then, shall we get closer together and talk?" said Hsiao. "This isn't a formal meeting, folks. We're just going to talk things over together. We suffered fourteen years under the puppet Manchukuo regime, while the landlords have ridden roughshod over poor people like us for thousands of years. We all have a bellyful of bitterness to pour out. And we can talk freely today—we poor folks have come into our own."

"Quite right, quite right! The Eighth Route Army and the United Democratic Army do serve the people. You all saw the way the Third Battalion behaved while they were here," Liu Teh-shan responded first. "Now we can depend upon Team Leader Hsiao. We can say whatever we like."

"Right. We'll each tell something." This was from a man standing by the window, who proved to be Li Chen-chiang. He pushed back his grey felt hat and exposed his bald head gleaming in the lamplight.

"Speak up. It doesn't matter who speaks first," said Liu. "If you stumble, you can try again."

"That's right. The Democratic Army practises democracy. They don't scold, beat, or find fault. Speak up. Who'll speak first?" Li urged.

The two of them were the only ones to speak. No one else said a word. Chao Yu-lin sat on the desk, smoking his pipe. Old Sun was lost in a distant corner. Tien Wan-shun sat speechless

beside Li, stealing sidelong looks at his neighbour with scared and forlorn eyes. He was afraid not of Team Leader Hsiao but of Li who, he knew, was Han's spy. Sensing this, Hsiao said encouragingly:

"Don't be afraid of anybody. Say whatever you feel like saying."

"That's right. Nobody need be afraid of anybody else. Let each have his say," chimed in Li again. "The puppet regime of Manchukuo is a thing of the past. Now nobody can oppress anybody else."

Silence continued to reign except for the sizzling of Chao's pipe. The team leader was pacing the room, casting about for a way to break the ice. He was considering the idea that the villagers should be given a simple and definite topic on which they had some knowledge and also courage enough to talk. He knitted his brows and bent his head. Then he removed his cap with one hand and scratched his head with the other—a clean-shaved and gleaming head. Finally he raised his head and asked:

"Who were conscripted for forced labour?"

"We all were!" They all responded except Li. Everybody started recalling those days of hunger, cold, and beatings—a living death. The whole room broke into a babble. They spoke at the same time—over twenty of them—dividing into small groups, each struggling to be heard. Li Chen-chiang having nothing to say, just smirked, while the others poured out their grievances.

"I was conscripted and left home for six months. When I got back, the farm had gone to seed." Chao Yu-lin knocked his pipe on the edge of the desk.

"You lost a crop, but I lost a wife!" said Hua Yung-hsi, a widower living next door to Chao. "In 1940 my wife was ill when they conscripted me for labour. I went to see a Japanese officer called Miya and begged him to let me wait until my wife had recovered. But the Japanese rolled his deep-set eyes fiercely at me and grunted: 'So you don't want to go. Do you want me to go for you? Your wife is ill and you're a fool, but do you take me for a fool? You want me to help you—who's going to help me? You idiot! You son of a bitch! I'll give you a good hiding!' He worked himself up into a regular fury and took up a club. I left thinking to myself, 'If I must go, I must.' I was away for six

months. I came home only to find my wife dead and buried. So now I'm still a widower." He heaved a sigh.

"Your wife died. I came near being killed myself. I worked in the Tungning coal mine. Long hours and short rations—two tiny dumplings and a bowl of thin millet congee for a meal. I was starved till my belly button lay flat against my spine." Seeing everyone else talking, Old Sun squeezed forward to put in his word.

"What's that to my experience?" Tien Wan-shun ventured, defying Li's forbidding scowl and craning neck. "We worked on the slope of a mountain. Driven mad by hunger, some of us climbed the precipices to find herbs to eat. The Japanese guards soon forbade us to do this, because it held up work. Often in the evening they lined us up and looked into our mouths to see if there was anything green sticking inside. If so, it was an offence, and the offender was clubbed to unconsciousness. Hunger plus beatings carried off a dozen or two of us every day."

"What's a dozen or two? You haven't seen men dying like flies." Liu Teh-shan, inspired by the example of honest and timid Tien, came out with a story of his own: "I worked in a coal mine too and ate nothing but congee every day. It was a bitterly cold winter, the ground piled with snow three feet high. We were too hungry and cold to carry on our work. One midnight somebody shook me out of my sleep, saying, 'Get up quick. Go and haul coal.' Rubbing my eyes, I asked: 'Why? Is it dawn already?' He snapped: 'Come on. Do you want another flogging?' I clambered off the bunk and hurried to the mine. The cart was there and I put out a hand to feel if it was filled to capacity. But this time the touch gave me the creeps. I let out a cry, and immediately felt the whip on my back, accompanied with a muffled 'Another shriek, you bastard, and you die!' In terrified silence I dragged the load off. Guess what it was. It was dead bodies frozen stiff! I made several trips back and forth to the frozen river and was forced to dump the corpses one by one through a hole in the ice. You think a dozen dead men a terrible sight, don't you? But I saw cartloads of them. Human life then wasn't worth a straw. A man died and went down the icy hole, that was all."

Endless were their stories of toil and blood, and Team Leader Hsiao let everybody have his say. When it was pretty late in the

night, he gave a new cue: "It was a miracle that you survived that slave labour. . . ."

"Indeed, it was," they chorused before Hsiao had finished.

"But for the thundering of the Soviet guns on August the fifteenth, we'd all have gone under the frozen river through the icy hole," added Chao.

"Right," said Hsiao. "Now do you remember any landlord having been conscripted?"

"No! Not one. No landlord was ever conscripted," all answered.

"Why?" Hsiao pursued.

All sorts of explanations were offered. Some said that the landlords gave money to be exempted from labour. Some said that they had friends and relatives in the government offices who used their influence to protect them. Some said that they had sons and nephews in the army, the police force and the secret service of the puppet government so that they were free. Some said that they contrived to send off their tenants and farmhands as their substitutes.

"Were many families in this village exempted?"

"Many, many," answered Li Chen-chiang hastily. He had kept silent until now.

"Was Han Number Six ever conscripted?" Team Leader Hsiao got down to brass tacks.

"Even if the Japanese police had wanted one thousand labourers from this village, they would never have picked on Han Number Six," observed Chao Yu-lin, lighting his pipe again.

While Chao was speaking, three men who had been standing in the shadow sneaked out of the room. Liu Sheng was getting up to call them back, when Team Leader Hsiao stopped him, saying: "Let them go." He turned to the gathering and asked: "How do you live? How does Han Number Six live? In matters of food, clothing, housing, bedding, can you compare with him?"

"There's no comparison," answered Liu Teh-shan.

"Some goods aren't up to others, some men must die while others live," said Old Sun.

"How can we poor folks compare with those big landlords?" Seeing everybody else speaking, timid Tien Wan-shun joined in again. "They were born under lucky stars. They never fetch and carry, yet they eat delicacies, drink sweet wine, wear silk and satin,

and live in fine mansions. We rise early, sleep late, dig and drag, eat willow leaves and wear sacks. Housing? You can't even live in a straw-thatched hut you rig up with your own hands. . . !" Tears dripped down his weather-beaten face. The bitter memory of how Han Number Six had seized three rooms he had built, and turned them into a stable, choked Tien. Besides, Li Chen-chiang's forbidding stare made him afraid to go on.

"What ails you, uncle?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

Little Wang asked Chao who this old man was, then went up to him and, placing a hand on his shoulder, said kindly:

"Old Tien, it's time you poured out all your bitterness."

"Go on, and tell us all about your grievances," Team Leader Hsiao urged.

Old Tien glanced at Li Chen-chiang and answered weakly:

"It's all fate. I mustn't grumble. I have nothing more to say. Let the other folks speak."

Li Chen-chiang rose to speak. He bowed first to the team leader and then to the audience.

"Since so few people want to speak," he drawled, "let me say a few words. I'm a poor speaker, so please excuse me. My name is Li Chen-chiang, I'm a tenant of Han's, like Old Tien. We two have worked with Han for quite a few years and know pretty well what kind of man he is. He has a bad tongue but a good heart."

Liu Sheng and Little Wang sprang to their feet in anger and strode up to the tenant Li.

"Who sent you here?" Liu Sheng demanded.

"Nobody sent me," Li answered in a faltering voice.

"What did you come here for?" Little Wang demanded.

"Nothing," he parried, trying desperately to appear unruffled.

"You'd better let him finish," Team Leader Hsiao told Little Wang, afraid that these two impetuous youths might go too far and even come to blows with the man. And he did not want action taken only by the work team, because that way they would not be able to educate the masses, and might distract their attention from Han himself. He said to Li in a calm voice:

"So you are his tenant? Good. Will you tell us how many *mou* of land he has?"

"About eleven hundred *mou* in this village, I think."

"How many in other villages? In other provinces?"

"I've no idea."

"How many draft animals and carts has he?"

"About a dozen animals, I think, but I'm not sure."

"You're wrong there! Who doesn't know that Han has over twenty draft animals." A man standing in the shadow corrected him in a loud voice, and Li turned to see who the fellow was.

"You needn't look round," Team Leader Hsiao told him with a sarcastic smile. "It's no use marking a fellow. The puppet regime is no more. Bandit Liu Tso-fei has fled. Even Chiang Kai-shek can't save himself any more than a clay idol can save itself while swimming across a river. Still less can he save Han Number Six." It was a devastating statement dispassionately made. The team leader would have added: "Han's life is in the hands of the poor people," but he refrained, thinking that it would not do to go so far while the people themselves were not yet fully conscious of their power. He tried another tack: "Can you tell me what benefits you receive from Han for the services you render him? Does he give you free land to till?"

"How could he?" Li Chen-chiang answered, hanging his head and trying to look honest. But that was a lie. He remembered that on the night of the arrival of the work team Han had called him over and they had conferred in secret for some time. The landlord had solicited his support and promised in return to exempt him from rent for three years. For the sake of this three years' grace and for the sake of his own few *mou* of land, one or two horses, a house, some grain stowed away in the cellar, and because Han was his elder in their secret gang, this man Li was now stubbornly speaking up for the landlord against the peasants. Team Leader Hsiao knew him for what he was but decided to give him rope. At the moment priority must be given to Han. Hsiao stepped to the centre of the room and asked all the people:

"Did Han Number Six ever oppress you?"

"He did! He did!" The whole room instantly broke into an excited babble.

"Tell me how he oppressed you."

Different facts were revealed. Han had racked his tenants by lending them money for the purchase of seed at seven or eight per cent monthly interest and at compound interest. In case of default

of payment the peasant had been forced to sell to him what he would take, sometimes even his own family into the bargain. He had asserted his exclusive right to the well which his neighbours had sunk with their own hands. Some said if you offended him, he would make you pay with your life. And he had used every under-hand means to lay hands on the good-looking daughters or wives of poor villagers.

Mention of this last was too much for Tien Wan-shun. In the dim light of the bean-oil lamp his eyes were seen glistening with tears.

"Old Tien, what's wrenching your heart? Let's hear it." Team Leader Hsiao said sympathetically.

"I've nothing much to say," the old man answered evasively, casting a sidelong glance at Li Chen-chiang.

Chao Yu-lin leaped off the desk, stuck his pipe in his waist-band, took a step or two forward, unbuttoned the greatcoat given him by the Soviet Army, and bared his muscular sun-tanned chest. That was a habit of his—whenever he spoke he got so excited he would sweat, so he always bared his chest first.

"Good neighbours. I'm one of the poorest men of this village. I know you call me Bare Bottom behind my back, but I don't mind. I wouldn't mind if you called me that to my face."

Somebody laughed.

"What's that you are laughing at?" somebody else protested indignantly. "I wonder how you can find it in your heart to jeer at a poor man."

"No matter. Let him have a good laugh," Chao continued unruffled. "Anyway, Team Leader Hsiao knows that it's no disgrace to be poor. My wife had no trousers to wear and nothing much to eat for five years, it's true. But she never did anything to be ashamed of."

"What he says is quite true," Old Sun confirmed. "His wife is worth her weight in gold."

"We had not a rag on us and not a rag on the *kang*," Chao went on. "In summer it was not too bad. But in winter, when the northwest wind was blowing and heavy snow was falling, we had quite a time of it—when our family of four huddled on the *kang* in the evening, we had a taste of the four seasons. We had summer beneath and winter above, and spring and autumn for just

a fleeting moment when we turned over. If you liked that spring and autumn temperature, you had to keep rolling right and left from dusk to dawn. You couldn't sleep a wink."

"All he says is true," Old Sun repeated. "Everybody who's poor has been through the like."

"But poor men have backbones. My wife and I hate to ask for help. We don't steal or rob. We toil and moil. But it is curious that the more honest you are and the harder you work, the more you suffer. In December 1942, our pot was often empty for days at a time. Sometimes I was lucky enough to shoot down a pheasant or two, but pheasants don't come your way every day. Once we had not eaten anything for three days—little So-chu and his sister lay limp on the *kang* crying for food. My wife sat there tearful and dumb."

Hearing this, Tien Wan-shun again hung his head, and tears coursed down his cheeks in big drops. He was pitying himself as he sympathized with Chao. Little Wang dabbed his eyes too with his sleeve. Liu Sheng went to the window and looked up at the stars in the early autumn sky—he felt a heavy stone weighing on his heart. Even Team Leader Hsiao, a cool-headed man, spoke with a voice quivering with emotion:

"Go on, please. What happened then?"

"It was clear that the children would starve to death unless I quickly found a way out. Against my will I decided to approach Han. I trembled at the sight of his black gate, but for my children's sake I had to go in. Four long-haired wolf dogs sprang out from nowhere and I evaded them as best I could. Han's bodyguard Li Ching-shan rushed out and stopped me in the courtyard, shouting: 'Look, how dirty you are! You can't go in.' A voice from the room asked: 'Old Li, who's that?' I recognized the gruff voice as Han's. Li answered: 'Chao of the south end.' The voice grunted: 'Ask him what he wants.' His bodyguard answered: 'He says he wants a loan.' This caused a big head with bald temples to stick out of the window—it was Han himself. He said with a sneer: 'Chao, I know you're a proud fellow. You seldom stoop. Why do you condescend to come to my poor house today? If I don't give you a loan, I'll be doing a disservice to your wife.' At this Li gave a guffaw, and I felt my heart flaming and mouth fuming. Han rattled on: 'You want a loan, don't you? I've plenty of money.

I'll lend you as much as you want, but on one condition.' He paused for my answer. The thought of my starving and wailing children made me answer: 'Let's hear it.' Han spat out: 'Tonight, at bedtime, send your wife to me for the money.' I felt my heart splitting. But what could I do, a helpless poor man, with two empty fists? When I turned to go, Li Ching-shan set the dogs on me—they tore my trousers and bit my ankle. The next day I had better luck—I shot down a pheasant. While eating the long overdue meal, the labour conscription order came and I had to go at once. My wife and children cried their hearts out. When I got back, I heard that my wife, to escape the clutches of Han Number Six, had smeared her face and made herself look a fright, and that she and the children had gone begging. My little daughter, So-chu's sister, starved to death. Another time, Han ordered me to kneel on crocks, which cut into the flesh. It hurt as badly as if I'd fallen on a mound of swords, and the blood spilled over the crocks and the ground." He lifted a leg up onto the edge of the desk, rolled up the trouser to above the knee and, pointing to the scars, said: "Look at these scars, here—here—here!"

The crowd closed in and gazed at the scars for a minute before he put his leg down. The long recital of his grievances and the sight of his old scars had worked Chao up. Now he shouted gruffly:

"Neighbours, the work team is with us! I want to avenge myself on Han. I want to get my own back. During the puppet Manchukuo regime he was head of this village. How many of you were beaten by him?"

"No end of people," cried Old Sun.

"That's right, many were beaten," repeated Liu Teh-shan.

"Do you know who caused the death of the children of the Ku family and the Chen family of the south end and of the Huang family outside the West Gate?" demanded Chao.

Nobody wanted to venture an answer. One or two persons were edging to the door as if they wanted to leave. Fearing that the silence might give the bad eggs an opportunity to throw cold water upon the proceedings, Team Leader Hsiao hastily suggested to Chao that he should try another question—one they could all answer and that would stir them up.

"Is Han a bad man or a good man?" asked Chao.

"Bad!" they roared in chorus.

"He ground us down—should we settle accounts with him or not?"

"We should!" some agreed.

"Sure!" said others.

"Have we the courage to settle accounts with him?" Chao boomed.

"Yes, we have!" all shouted with one voice.

"Of course we have!" Liu Teh-shan chimed in, from his place beside Team Leader Hsiao.

"You all say you dare! Follow me then! In a revolution we have to do more than talk. Let's go and catch that bastard. When the people see Han bound up, they'll be brave enough to accuse him."

Chao elbowed his way through the throng, making for the door. He wiped the sweat on his forehead with the sleeve of his old army coat which was unbuttoned, hanging loose and trailing.

The classroom was a scene of commotion. People ran here and there, clustering together to talk and argue. Different voices and different views could be heard.

"Let's go with Uncle Chao to catch the big traitor!" shouted some eager youngsters.

"Very well, let's go," some reticent middle-aged men agreed.

"It's late now—the stars are high in the sky. Why not wait until tomorrow?" suggested some older men who were sleepy.

"You can't tell what's in people's minds. Some people may join both sides—they eat the food and scrape the bowl. They may let on and Han may escape," the youngsters retorted, eager to go into action at once. As they spoke, Team Leader Hsiao saw Li Chen-chiang fidgetting uncomfortably.

"Where can he escape to? The Communists are in power everywhere," observed some one who preferred to go home and rest.

"Escape? But his house and property can't escape. 'The monk may run away, but the temple can't run with him.'"

"Let's be off! Those who have courage come with me!" Chao did not seem to have heard what the others had said. "Those who fear trouble had better go home to cuddle their wives and kids under the quilt," he shouted. "Old Liu, I think you'd better run home too." Liu Teh-shan was already at the door, ready to

slip off. He was pale with fright, but afraid folk would laugh at him, so, trying to put a brave face on the matter, he answered:

"What should I go home for? If you go and catch Han, why not I?" He forced a smile.

The work team supported Chao. They were overjoyed at the rapid development of the situation. Seeing Chao getting up steam the way he did, Liu Sheng jumped up with glee and exclaimed to Section Leader Chang: "Look at them—how great the peasants are!" He had forgotten in his enthusiasm that Chang was a peasant too.

Little Wang squeezed his way to the door, undid the strap of his automatic, and told Chao Yu-lin to arm himself with it.

"Take this with you, in case you need it. That bastard may have guns. Can you fire a gun?"

"No, not this kind," muttered Chao. "I've learned to use a musket before." But he stretched out his big hand for it.

"You'll get the hang of it in no time. Come on, I'll show you how to use it." Little Wang dragged Chao to the middle of the room and, in the dim light, took the gun out of its holster and slipped in some bullets with a click. Then he cocked the trigger, and said: "Touch this and out goes the bullet—another touch, another discharge." Chao nodded his head, took over the gun, slung the strap across his shoulder, and was about to go, when Little Wang called to him: "Just a minute. Take a rope with you." He hurriedly unstrung his baggage rope and gave it to him. "Tie him up tight. Dealing with a counter-revolutionary, leave nothing to chance."

In the midst of the general excitement Team Leader Hsiao tried to keep calm. Like Liu Sheng and Little Wang, he was elated at Chao's fighting spirit. But his sense of responsibility to the cause of revolution and the importance of the task given him by the Party always made him want to study a situation thoroughly and dispassionately. He was pacing up and down in one corner, cap in hand, scratching his close-shaved head from habit. He thought that under the circumstances, when the villagers had not been sufficiently prepared or adequately roused, Chao might be running too far ahead of the masses of less politically conscious peasants. On the other hand, the work team could not very well do anything to damp the enthusiasm of the activists. Anyway, the

landlord must be arrested. Chao was right when he said: "When the people see Han bound up they'll be brave enough to accuse him." All right, then, let's arrest him and see what happens. Suddenly he remembered that Han Number Six had organized an armed unit before and might therefore have guns by him. Afraid that Chao might be worsted, he gave orders:

"Tell Chao to wait a minute." Then he called to Section Leader Chang, who was standing by.

"Here," Chang answered, springing to attention.

"You go with Chao," ordered Team Leader Hsiao, "and take eight men along. When you get there, leave four men at the gate and go in with the other four. Fix bayonets."

After all had gone, the leader of the work team fell to reflecting what had come to pass at the meeting. "Not bad—the result," he told himself with a smile of satisfaction, and mused: "Only Tien Wan-shun seemed to be hiding something. He must have some great sorrow—what can it be? Tomorrow I'll have a talk with him." He turned to Wan, his orderly. "Any water? Cold water will do. Fetch me a basinful—I haven't washed my face for three days. And then you may go and watch them catching Han Number Six."

The group were on the way to the Han mansion, with Chao walking with big strides at the head. The autumn night was cool. The Milky Way above was twinkling with a myriad of stars. Far and near, crickets and grasshoppers were chirping incessantly. At the disturbing footfalls below, the sparrows on the trees started with fright and hopped from twig to twig, shaking the dew-laden leaves so that the dew dropped on the men's shoulders and their guns.

Li Chen-chiang had disappeared into the darkness. He had whisked into a vegetable garden, and taken the short cut towards the Han mansion.

Halfway there, Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, started to lag behind, and slunk into a roadside shed when no one was looking. After the echo of footsteps had faded away, he popped his head out and looked both ways, then crawled out and started to run home, drawing in his head between his shoulders so that no one would recognize him.

The others were marching forward, armed and unarmed togeth-

er, with a tramping of feet. Old Sun and Tien Wan-shun, whose joints were stiff with age, hobbled slowly along behind, trying to catch up all the time. The fixed bayonets on the rifles gleamed in the starlight, and appeared from afar to be cutting through the murky grey air.

All along the road dogs started barking, waking many people from a sound sleep. Soon the whole village was astir.

VII

THE night Chao Yu-lin led a group of men to arrest Han Number Six, many people in Yuanmao had their sleep disturbed. The lights in the mansion and the schoolhouse were burning throughout the night, and the atmosphere was tense in both places. Both sides were putting all their strength into the struggle, keyed up for all eventualities. But it was a desperate, hopeless fight for the one side and confident revolutionary action for the other.

As Chao and his men headed for Han's house, they met two men coming towards them, their figures silhouetted against the starlight. In another minute they recognized Han and his bodyguard, Li Ching-shan. The suddenness of it all startled Chao—he was speechless and instinctively hid the rope he was carrying behind his back. The bald head looming up before him was the terrible landlord, Han, whom the country folk had never dared look in the face. "How can I seize him?" wondered Chao. Seeing his hesitation, Han adopted his usual high and mighty tone: "Old Chao, I'm told you want to put me under arrest. Well, here I am!"

Seeing Han in a towering rage, some of the men began to take to their heels. Old Tien dared not advance, and Old Sun retreated step by step to make his way slowly home. Only the youngsters stood by Chao.

"Why don't you speak up?" demanded Han, taking a step forward. "What's that rope for—there behind your back? Do you want to arrest me? Who gives you the authority? What have I done to be arrested? If you want to arrest a man, you must give the reason. I have a few *mou* of land and a few rooms inherited from my ancestors, and I haven't stolen anything or robbed anybody. What harm have I done you that you should bring a rope to seize

me? Come on. Let's go together to see the land reform workers and talk it over with them."

Seeing Chao intimidated by Han, Section Leader Chang came to his rescue. "We have talked it over," he said. "Everybody knows how many crimes you've committed."

"Don't you remember making me kneel on crocks?" Chao plucked up courage again. The fact that Chao dared speak out took Han aback a little. However, he immediately denied the charge and tried to soft-soap him, saying: "Brother Chao, you've got it wrong. Why! I never did such a thing."

Enraged, Chao answered furiously:

"Can your lie alter the fact? I won't argue with you here. Let's go and see Team Leader Hsiao." The rope appeared again just as suddenly as it had disappeared.

"Very well, let's go." The landlord trembled inwardly at Chao's unexpected firmness, but he tried to put a bold face on it. "Even Team Leader Hsiao'll have to talk reason. Black and white can't be confused. I've a clear record, and nobody can libel me. Brother Chao, who can wrong an upright man?"

"Who's your brother Chao? Don't 'brother' me."

"We're brothers, aren't we? We live in the same village and meet every day. Perhaps, in spite of myself, I may have spoken sharply to you once or twice during the past or failed to take good care of you. I admit it, but then that's a family affair. Why should you wash dirty linen in public and make a fool of yourself? The proverb says: 'A near neighbour is dearer than a distant relative!'"

"Come on," interposed Section Leader Chang. "Stop gabbing."

"Let's move on," said Chao. "It's too late now for you to argue. When the Japanese were here, you forced me to kneel on crocks in pools of my own blood. 'Sir,' I begged, 'I can't bear the pain. Let me off—I'm your neighbour.' And have you forgotten what you said then? You said: 'Who's your neighbour, you bastard!' Now you quote the proverb at me. You sent me to forced labour before it was my turn, and when I came back my daughter was dead. Yet you call yourself my good neighbour!" Remembering with bitterness the days when he hadn't even trousers to wear, and how his little girl had died, Chao grew angry.

"Get going. It's a waste of breath reasoning with you. Get a move on!"

"All right, I'm going! What do I fear? You may accuse me, but I'm not guilty. 'A straight foot is not afraid of a crooked shoe.' I'll go with you."

"So you think you haven't done any wrong?" demanded Chao. "The first time the bandits came, you gave a party for three days and three nights to welcome them. The second time, you let them in through the West Gate to raid the village. When they left, you hadn't lost so much as a straw. Aren't you hand in glove with the bandit chiefs? Besides, let me ask you, where has your younger brother gone to?"

"When the bandits came, didn't I fire at them too?" protested Han weakly, but evaded the question about his brother. He felt thoroughly nervous, but tried to keep calm.

"You fired at the bandits, indeed! You were firing a salute. Everybody knew you were firing into the sky." Chao called his bluff.

"Where's your gun?" asked Section Leader Chang, hearing that the landlord had one.

"I surrendered it to the government office at Yimienpo."

"Is that true?" Section Leader Chang asked Chao.

"Who knows?"

"Let's move on. If you want to go, let's get going," urged Han, thereby warding off questions as to the gun. "You go home," he turned to his bodyguard, "and tell them that I'm paying a visit to the work team, that it's all right. Tell the women to be careful while I'm away." When Li had gone, Han again urged the group to hurry. "Let's move on," he said. "I want to see Team Leader Hsiao and ask him to explain why Chao should come in the dead of night to arrest me, for no reason at all. What law allows this? You're trumping up a charge against an innocent man, that's what you're doing!"

"All right, come and accuse me," answered Chao walking the landlord off.

After they arrived at the schoolhouse, some of the villagers went home. Little Wang pulled Chao to the window and asked him what had happened. The latter told him that they had met Han halfway and had an argument with him. When the peasant quoted the landlord as saying: "'A straight foot is not afraid of a crooked shoe,'" the land reform worker broke into a guffaw and quoted a

quip: "The uglier a woman is, the more flowers she wants to wear in her hair."

Team Leader Hsiao also came over and shook Chao's hand. After listening to Chao's report, the team leader whispered to Chao that he should immediately go back to contact those who could see eye to eye with him and to rally as many farmhands and poor villagers as possible to accuse Han at a mass meeting. "All right, you go home now," he said finally. The peasant returned the automatic to Little Wang and was starting to go, when Team Leader Hsiao remembered something and called him to wait:

"Just a minute, Old Chao," and he turned to Section Leader Chang: "Let Chao use one of our rifles."

Section Leader Chang handed him a rifle with three belts of cartridges, and Team Leader Hsiao added:

"You must be on the alert, Old Chao."

Han had bowed politely to Team Leader Hsiao when he first entered the room, but the latter had given him the cold shoulder and turned to talk with Chao. Wan, the orderly, had said: "You wait over there." And he had taken Han to a corner of the room. But Han had cocked his ears to eavesdrop.

Directly Chao had left, he stepped up to the team leader and made a low bow once more, smiling slyly.

The team leader looked him up and down. The landlord was half bald, with a waxen face and blackened teeth that showed when he smiled. He was wearing a white silk jacket, blue flower-patterned trousers, and leather shoes. So this was the man who had supplied the Kuomintang bandits with information, horses, guns, and provisions. His younger brother was still a bandit chief in Taching Mountain. Team Leader Hsiao had heard a lot about this man before coming to this village, and since his arrival he had heard much more.

"So you are the worthy Mr. Han," said Team Leader Hsiao sarcastically.

"My name is Han Feng-chi," answered the landlord with another bow. "I was sorry you could not honour me with your company at dinner the other day, and I have been wanting to pay you a visit."

"It's not too late now," said Hsiao. The landlord took out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to the team leader, who refused. Han lighted and smoked it himself.

"You wouldn't have come to this poor, wild, out-of-the-way place but for our sake. It's too shabby and inconvenient here, you don't even have enough stools to go round. If you care to move into my house tomorrow, you're welcome. I shall vacate the north wing, and you may have your office in there. Besides, we country people are so ignorant of things in the present democratic world, I hope to benefit by your advanced knowledge."

"Tomorrow's affairs we'll decide tomorrow. For tonight, you stay here."

"How now? Surely you don't mean it—are you taking me into custody?" He was flustered, but made himself appear calm. He had not expected that Chao could have turned against him and that Team Leader Hsiao should have put him under arrest. With his relatives and sworn brothers all over this village, his friends and relatives in Harbin, Chiamussu and Yimienpo, and his younger brother in Taching Mountain, he had thought he was as safe as a rock. Who would dare lift a finger against him? Now events had taken him by surprise. Was he really a prisoner already?

"May I go home now and come back presently, Team Leader Hsiao?"

"No," was the laconic reply.

"Team Leader Hsiao, you may think there's no need, but I say it's necessary. If you won't allow me to go, you must give me the reason." There was a hypocritical smile on his sallow face.

"It's no, and that's all," thundered Little Wang, bringing his right palm down on the desk. "Who cares to reason with a traitor landlord?"

"Young comrade, you shouldn't be so ready to call a fellow names," Han protested.

"Indeed! I'm going to slap your face too!" said Little Wang.

"Young comrade, the Eighth Route Army and the Communists never curse people or beat them!" said Han, and thought complacently: "I've licked him now."

"The Eighth Route Army and the Communists never curse good people or beat them, that's true," replied Team Leader Hsiao slowly yet firmly. "But in dealing with bad eggs—well, I'm not so sure." Just then Han's wife and concubine burst in, wailing. Mrs. Han was beating her breast, squalling, while the concubine was whimpering without tears.

"What crime has our man committed that you keep him here?" piped the wife. "You go ahead and kill me, kill all of us, why don't you?"

"Team Leader," chimed in the concubine, pulling out a pink handkerchief and dabbing her nose with it, "if you put our man under arrest, isn't that contrary to your good policy?"

These two women were soon reinforced by a whole gang—Han's daughters-in-law, his nephews and their wives, his nieces and their husbands all trooped into the room. His daughter Aicheng brought up the rear. She was dressed to kill, her pink underwear showing through her white silk jacket. Going up to Han, she leaned on his shoulder and whimpered:

"Papa, they're wronging you!"

To add to this pandemonium, in barged the other two big landlords of the village, Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang, at the head of at least thirty men. They swarmed in, and clustered around the land reform workers. Tu bowed to Team Leader Hsiao just as Han had done, except that, being fat and pot-bellied, he could not bend so low. Then Tang stepped forward and presented Hsiao with a piece of paper which had on it these words:

"To Team Leader Hsiao. Mr. Han Feng-chi has been taken into custody by your work team. He must have been falsely accused by someone who bears him a grudge. As he is a very, very good citizen, we beg you to be good enough to release him at once. We, the undersigned, are willing to go bail for him."

There followed the names, fingerprints or seals of thirty-two people.

Han's nephew, Long-neck Han, took advantage of all the noise and confusion to slip up to Han, and confer with him in a whisper. They had just finished when Tu wheezed:

"Please let him go, Team Leader."

"We'll bail for him," added Tang with a long sigh.

The wailing of the women and pestering of the men did not flurry Team Leader Hsiao in the least. Sitting calmly on the desk watching the melodramatic scene being staged by these actors and actresses, he could not help being amused. When the petition was handed to him, he read it slowly, and when he came to "As he is

a very, very good citizen," he burst out laughing and said to Tang who stood at the head of the group:

"Han was head of this village for two years during the puppet Manchukuo regime. His elder brother was a big spy for the Japanese, and his younger brother is still a Kuomintang bandit chief. Han's nickname is Big Stick; he went through all the neighbouring villages beating people up. He used a hundred wiles to ruin decent women. He seized the better farms. Now in this petition here you say he is a very, very good citizen. Well, I would like to ask—what country is he a very, very good citizen of? Eh?"

Everybody was dumb. Surprised to find his biography so well known to the leader of the team, Han said to Tu and Tang:

"Thank you for your kind offer to bail me out. That's not necessary now. Team Leader Hsiao is only keeping me here for a talk. I'm all right. You'd better go home." He turned to his wife. "Go home. Don't worry. Team Leader Hsiao'll let me go home soon." To his concubine: "Send me a packet of cigarettes, and supper with wine."

Han's family and the men who had offered to put up bail for him cleared out. Soon after, his bodyguard Li Ching-shan brought in an enamel food container painted with green twigs and leaves, and a decanter of white wine. He placed the food and wine on a desk near his master. Han invited Team Leader Hsiao to join him, but the latter declined. Then he invited Liu Sheng and Little Wang, saying:

"Just taste our local cooking, comrades—roe buck venison and kaoliang wine."

Nobody paid any attention to him, and he sat down to a solitary meal. He drank till his cheeks turned crimson. Then he lit a cigarette and puffed at it furiously, leaning his head on his hand to think, recalling the past with very mixed feelings. He had started from scratch. After the puppet Manchukuo regime came into being, he got the support of Japanese invaders, prospered rapidly, and bought land hand over fist—ten thousand *mou* on the north bank of the Sungari, over two thousand *mou* in Pinhsien County, and about one thousand *mou* in this village. To camouflage his wealth, he chose to live in the village where his land holdings were smallest. He purchased shares in a Japanese timber company and owned one third of the shares of the distillery "Fortune and Virtue." "Poor

men's pain is rich men's gain" was his tenet. His hands were red with the blood of tenants and farmhands. He knew he had many enemies, but he believed the puppet Manchukuo regime would last thousands of years, strong as an "iron barrel" behind which he was well protected and invulnerable. Who could have thought that on August 15, 1945, guns would roar out, and within ten days the "iron barrel" would have been pricked like a bubble! Some of the Japanese died, and some fled, abandoning Han like a homeless waif. For a time he was in a panic and considered himself finished. Then the "Central Vanguard" of Chiang Kai-shek arrived under the command of Liu Tso-fei who incorporated the forces of Han's brothers and, through them, appointed Han interim head of the village. He was in the swim again and went about organizing an armed unit. As soon as Liu came to the village, he ordered all the landlords to give a party for three days and nights in welcome. The money squeezed from the villagers in taxes he spent like water. However, within a fortnight, the Third Battalion of the 359th Brigade of the Eighth Route Army came and the "Central Vanguard" vanished overnight. Han stowed away his guns. Now this little work team had come to Yuanmao, and looked as if it was going to turn the whole village upside-down. Even Chao Yu-lin, whom he usually considered beneath his notice, had dared to bring men to lay hands on him! This was something which his father and father's fathers could never have dreamt of. Was he having a nightmare from overeating? No. Here he was, obviously, under arrest with no idea what was going to happen tomorrow! He went cold, gripped by a strange and terrible fear!

"This state of affairs won't last long." This thought flashed across his mind and gave him temporary relief. "How can a pack of poor men stay in power?" This was what he told people, and what he believed. So he set himself to weather the storm, and wait for better days.

"When will that day come?" He suddenly flagged. He had received no news of his son who had joined the Kuomintang army. It looked as if the work team would be here for some time. Very well, let them see who was the stronger. He cast a furtive glance at Team Leader Hsiao sitting there and he felt quite angry. He recalled what he had told his nephew Long-neck Han one day: "Everything now depends upon how you react."

While Han was indulging in his reminiscences, Team Leader Hsiao told Little Wang and two other men to keep watch over the highway. Except for two or three men to be left as sentries about the school ground, all the other guards were to go out to call on the active elements among the peasants and arrange a mass meeting for the next day. The activists should be encouraged to air their grievances against Han at the mass meeting.

One by one the men went out. It was getting late—the stars were high in the sky. Dogs were barking at both ends of the village. Outside the courtyards before many sprawling huts, dark shadowy figures were lurking.

With his automatic strapped to his waist, Team Leader Hsiao was off to see what was going on in the Han mansion since the landlord's arrest. The years he had spent as a guerilla to the south of the Great Wall had made him fearless. He did not want to take Wan along with him. As he was skirting a hut with doors and windows fallen apart, he saw a shadow fleeting along the wall. "Who goes there?" he shouted. Scarcely had his voice rung out when—bang! a bullet whistled in his direction, whipping up the dust at his feet. With a bound he took cover behind a tree and fired a round at the corner of the hut.

"Who was that? Are you hurt?" called out Little Wang, who had heard the shot and run up, his finger on the trigger of his automatic.

"I'm all right," answered Hsiao, replacing his gun.

"Where did it come from?" Liu Sheng also had dashed up panting.

"Let's give chase," suggested Wan. Section Leader Chang had also appeared with some men from another direction. They all wanted to go and search around the hut.

"Let it go," said Team Leader Hsiao. "We're not familiar with the terrain around here, and the masses haven't been mobilized. If we act on the spur of the moment, we may suffer loss. The incident tonight is a warning to us. We must all be more careful in future." He turned to Section Leader Chang: "Alert the sentries tonight."

Meanwhile the hidden gunman had run into a willow grove and escaped north along a zigzag path. When he had run some way and heard no pursuing footsteps, he halted, wiped the beads of

sweat from his long neck with his sleeves, and strapped his revolver to his waistband. It was dawn when he reached home.

VIII

THESE days, all the villagers in Yuanmao were in the grip of a strange sensation. Behind windowpanes, through cracks of paper windows, amid maize and kaoliang plants, under willows, behind gourd trellises, on carts, they were eyeing the land reform workers curiously, wondering what would happen in the village after their arrival. They adopted different attitudes towards the new order of things, according to their individual social status, property and disposition. Some people were happy, some worried, some suspicious, some inwardly anxious but outwardly jovial. But none were unconcerned or could keep aloof.

Scarcely had the sun risen above the flaming horizon and wisps of greyish smoke begun curling up from the kitchens of the four hundred households of the village, when rumours started flying about from one end of the village to the other, like big black crows flapping their wings, hovering over house-tops and croaking:

"The team leader drank wine with Han Number Six last night."

"Who told you?"

"Li Chen-chiang saw them with his own eyes. He heard Team Leader Hsiao say: 'We're strangers here, so we need your help,' and Han answered: 'Certainly, I'm at your service.'"

"Where was the shooting last night?"

"Yes, bang! eleven shots! I thought it was bandits raiding again."

"There, you see! I heard it was Han's younger brother, Han Number Seven, coming back from Taching Mountain to rescue him."

"I heard too that Han Number Seven fired a round at the work team and shouted: 'Let my brother go!' When they didn't answer, he fired a second round. Soon Han Number Six himself appeared at the door waving his hand at his brother, saying: 'Don't fire! Team Leader Hsiao and I have agreed to co-operate from now on. All's well, so you'd better go home.' Then Han Number Seven apologized to Team Leader Hsiao, saying: 'I'm sorry for this mistake,' and rode back to the mountain the same night."

Rumours multiplied and became more sensational as they passed from mouth to mouth. Some even said: "Team Leader Hsiao and Han Number Six have kowtowed to each other and become sworn brothers." Others said: "Han is organizing a grand reception again, this time in honour of the work team."

After breakfast, Old Sun started sounding the brass gong again from one end of the village to the other and crying at the top of his voice:

"Come to the mass meeting at the schoolhouse! A meeting to accuse Han Number Six."

Chao Yu-lin was among the first to arrive. He stepped into the classroom, slung the rifle off his shoulder, and leaned it against the wall.

Liu Sheng buttonholed Chao to help set the stage for the accusation meeting. In the middle of the playground they rigged up a temporary platform out of six desks and twelve planks. On the trunks of two poplars by the platform they stuck up two slogans on white paper that Liu Sheng had written. One slogan read: "Peasants of Yuanmao Meet to Settle Scores!" The other: "Down with the Local Despot and Landlord Han Feng-chi!"

Villagers began to stream in, all in straw-hats, some stripped to the waist. Some stopped before the platform to watch Liu Sheng setting a desk and a few chairs in place. A big crowd clustered around a man who was telling a story about a bear pulling up maize: "He plucked two corn-cobs and stuck them under his left armpit. When he put out his paws to pick another two, the two he already had dropped to the ground. So he kept getting two corn-cobs and losing them at the same time. After a whole evening's work, he plodded off with two corn-cobs stuck under his armpit, no more and no less." The listeners were greatly amused. The story-teller, of course, was Old Sun.

There was Old Tien in a tattered straw-hat, squatting beside a wall, apparently avoiding conversation with anybody. A group of children was perched on the window-sills outside the classroom, peering through the glass panes at Han.

Nobody made any reference to the struggle against Han, but they were all in suspense, waiting eagerly for the meeting to come to order.

Han's family members, his kith and kin, grown-ups and children,

sworn brothers and small-fry gangsters had come in force and filtered into the crowd. Though they said nothing, everybody knew and feared them, and in their presence the villagers did their best to hide their interest in this meeting. Li Chen-chiang squatted down beside Old Tien and engaged him in conversation.

"How about your beans?" he asked.

"Finished. The weeds are taller than the plants. The field is still under water," the old man answered dejectedly.

"And the maize?"

"Worse!" As he answered, he demonstrated with his hand. "The plants are no taller than this. A sow can eat them without lifting her forelegs." He was on the point of saying: "My land was ruined by the bandits," but he stopped short, remembering Li Chen-chiang was Han's henchman, and a relative of Han's bodyguard Li Ching-shan, who was an agent of the bandits. So he swallowed his remark and heaved a sigh.

"Never mind, Old Tien," said Li Chen-chiang softly, with a quick glance round. "Don't you worry. Mr. Han says he won't ask you for any rent this year, and if you're short of grain now, you can go to his house for a few pecks. It's all right." Having said this he got up and disappeared into the crowd, where he tried to win sympathizers for the landlord.

Long-neck Han was moving about too, whispering to this man and patting that man on the shoulder, a crafty smile on his face.

Liu Sheng mounted the platform with a leap, and the gathering drew closer below. All turned and looked at the doorway through which Chao was bringing out Han, who was not bound. He told him to go onto the platform. Team Leader Hsiao had followed him out. He glanced around and sensed the lukewarm atmosphere. As he walked through the crowd he noticed Li Chen-chiang scurrying about, and told Wan to give him a warning. "If he goes on sneaking around, chuck him out."

Seeing Team Leader Hsiao, Long-neck Han quickly hid himself in the thick of the crowd and kept quiet. The team leader saw him but did not know who he was. The villagers all knew him to be Han's lackey, but dared not inform against him.

Once on the platform, Han took in the situation. Down there in the arena were his family, relatives and friends. His nephew Long-neck Han and Li Chen-chiang were there too. The muscles

in his ashy face contracted into a faint smile. He took out a packet of cigarettes, offered one to Liu Sheng and, after it was refused, lighted and smoked it himself. As he puffed, he deliberately sought conversation with Liu. When the latter sat down to rest his legs, Han sat down immediately in another chair beside him. He continued to emit ring after ring of bluish smoke, looking quite unruffled.

The crowd rippled with whispers.

"See! He's sitting side by side with the land reform worker!"

"Then it must be true that Team Leader Hsiao clinked glasses with him last night." Seven or eight hundred people had come, but now some of them started leaving. Team Leader Hsiao told Wan to go up and tell Liu Sheng not to sit together with Han, but to declare the meeting open at once. Liu Sheng stepped to the front of the platform and announced:

"Han Number Six is Public Enemy Number One of Yuanmao. Our work team has heard many villagers accuse Han of oppressing and exploiting the people. So last night he was brought here, and now we shall reason with him, and settle accounts with him." After these brief remarks, he concluded: "Those of you who have been wronged can take revenge, those of you with grievances can speak out. Don't be afraid."

Li Chen-chiang spoke up from the crowd:

"That's right, don't be afraid!"

However, everybody kept silent. Little Wang looked at Chao as much as to say: "Why don't you fire the first shot?"

Chao pushed his way to the front. The sight of Han sitting there completely at his ease made him angry. He unbuttoned his green jacket, because the idea of speaking in public had made him break into a sweat. He pointed a finger at Han and boomed:

"You traitor! You oppressed us more cruelly than the Japanese devils. In 1937, backed by that Japanese bastard Morita Taro, you conscripted me for forced labour before my turn. When I got back, my land had gone to seed, my daughter had died, and my wife and little boy had gone begging. The crop had failed, yet you insisted upon my paying you the rent. When I said I had nothing to give, you made me kneel on crocks till my blood spilled over the ground. Do you remember that? Folks!" He turned to the meeting: "Shall I get even with him, this old traitor?"

"Go ahead," responded several dozen men, among whom were a

dozen youngsters. Standing near the platform, they could see the scars on Chao's knees; they felt sorry for him and indignant. Mixed with the response was the hoarse voice of Old Tien.

"I've finished," said Chao. "Those who have grievances, speak up!"

There was a stir. Han's coterie were eyeing and marking their neighbours, but no one paid any attention to them.

"Who else wants to speak?" asked Liu from the platform.

After a few men had accused the landlord, a young fellow stepped forward from the right corner. He was wearing a tattered straw-hat and a vest which had been patched and repatched with rags of every colour and shape—red, grey, blue and checkered, till you could hardly tell what cloth the original vest was made of. This young man in the colourful vest stepped forward and said:

"Han, you relied on Japanese backing to have us poor folks savagely beaten. You were crueller than the Japanese devils! In 1938 you hired me as a farmhand. At the end of the year I asked for my wages, but you refused to pay me. When I asked why, you said, 'Because that's what I choose!' And the next day you told the Japanese clerk Miya to conscript me for forced labour. Now what have you got to say?"

"Down with big landlords! Down with traitors!" shouted Little Wang. These slogans were echoed by many, and a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd. Some cried: "Give him a thrashing!" However, the platform was high and no one went up. Han had been sitting there with his legs crossed, cigarette in mouth, and motionless. Because he had been many hours without opium he kept giving great yawns. Now Chao's indictment supported by Little Wang's slogans made him turn pale. He fidgetted, and dared not remain seated, growing more and more restless.

A man with a white beard, standing beside Long-neck Han, rolled up his sleeves and elbowed his way to the front, muttering:

"I should like a hearing too."

All eyes were turned on him. This was White Goatee, who had thrown a monkey-wrench into the proceedings of the last mass meeting. Now he too pointed an accusing finger at Han and declared:

"During the puppet Manchukuo time you lorded it over us. In 1938 I tethered a mare in your stable, and she kicked up a rumpus

with a stallion of yours. Then you rushed out and, without finding out which was in the right, just laid into my mare with your whip. 'It was your horse that started,' I said. 'You're whipping the wrong horse.' You said: 'Your mare had no business in my stable. Rape your mother!' Now I ask you, why should you want to rape my mother? How would you like it if I said: 'I'll rape your mother'?"

"You're welcome," answered Han, whose mother had died ten years before. The crowd laughed, and this lessened the tension between the two opposing camps, for many people relaxed. A little colour came back to Han's face and he started smoking again. White Goatee went on:

"I ask you, Han, you've offended so many people, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll do whatever you all say," answered Han, puffing away at his cigarette.

"Say yourself," White Goatee prompted, pretending to be indignant.

"If you ask me, my younger brother is to blame for what my neighbours have been referring to. But if I know I've done a wrong, I'll certainly put it right."

"Where is your younger brother then?" asked White Goatee, to divert the villagers' attention from Han.

"He's up in Taching Mountain. If you good folk can get him back you'll be ridding our family too of a great menace. You can beat him, or shoot him, or send him to jail just as you please. I shall be only too grateful."

"Don't just talk about that bandit brother of yours. Let's hear more about yourself," shouted Chao.

"What have I done wrong? Point out my mistakes, if any, and I'll take punishment. I've a few *mou* of land more than most, but even before the work team arrived I'd thought of offering it to you all."

"How many *mou* are you willing to offer us?" White Goatee prompted.

"By the sweat of their brow my ancestors accumulated about seven hundred *mou* of land. I'm willing to part with five hundred *mou*. That is, if you good folk allow me to keep the remaining two hundred *mou*, considering that I've ten mouths to feed. We belong

to the same village. I'm sure you don't want my family to starve to death."

Seeing that the once ferocious landlord had offered his land voluntarily, the villagers were in a melting mood. The weather was fine, and they had a lot to do in the fields. Han's family and sympathizers seized this psychological moment to come to his defence. They started speaking up for him among the crowd.

"Yes, the trouble with him is he has a few *mou* too many. Otherwise he's all right," said one of his sworn brothers.

"It was just chance that made him act as village head during the puppet regime; you can't blame him for that," another sympathizer observed.

"He's promised to behave better in future, so why not let it go at that?" another moralized.

"Five hundred *mou* to be distributed—that's good, but what about his horses? He has a lot; let him part with a few."

Hearing this, Han promptly offered:

"Very well then, I'll surrender five of them."

"See, he's even offering livestock!" exclaimed one of his relatives.

"The villagers haven't enough clothing, and you've plenty; why don't you offer some clothes as well, to round things off?" White Goatee suggested.

"All right, what you say goes. I'll give my blue silk cotton-padded coat, a pair of blue cloth trousers, and my wife's blue gown."

"Team Leader," White Goatee went up to Hsiao, clasping his hands in salute. "Han has offered land, horses, and clothes; it can't be easy for him. Won't you release him and leave him to us? If he does anything wrong again, you can easily bring him to book any time. What do you say, Team Leader?"

Team Leader Hsiao said nothing. White Goatee had made his character sufficiently known to him. Some poor men began to leave the meeting, dissatisfied. Some saw through Han's tricks, but dared not call his bluff. Other honest souls were taken in by his offer of land, horses and clothes, and were ready to forgive him. Old Sun had gone. Old Tien was still sitting beside the wall, his head bent, silent. Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, edged up to Long-neck Han and said with a grin:

"Yes, who can deny it was just chance that made Han become

village head? We know he was smart even under the puppet regime."

Chao went up to Little Wang and said: "My hands are itching to get at him!"

"Him—who?" asked Little Wang.

"That old fool, White Goatee. He's Han's sworn brother."

Chao said no more but walked off and squatted against the wall, standing the rifle between his knees.

It was already noon. Team Leader Hsiao said to Wan: "Go up and tell Liu Sheng to close the meeting first, and then consider the next step to be taken." And he ordered Han released.

Han got off the platform and stalked out with his wife, concubine and the whole gang in tow. Little Wang was furious and protested to Team Leader Hsiao, his neck swelling with indignation:

"Why must you let him go?"

"Well, I couldn't help it, could I?" Hsiao answered. Seeing how angry his assistant was, he meant to explain it to him in detail, but just then he saw Old Tien making off, and hurried over to talk with him for a while. As the old man was leaving, the team leader said:

"I'll pay you a visit later."

After people had left, the playground looked forlorn with just an empty platform in the middle.

Later that afternoon Li Ching-shan brought to the schoolhouse five horses and three pieces of clothing, and said:

"The five hundred *mou* of land offered by Han all lie outside the South and West Gates—they may be divided up and made over at any time."

The next morning Team Leader Hsiao called to see Old Tien, but found him out. He saw a blind old woman sitting on the *kang*, who told him that her old man had gone to the fields. He came back to the schoolhouse and found Liu Sheng and Chao discussing how to distribute Han's horses and clothes. After much deliberation, the animals and clothes were sent to a few of the most needy families, but very soon they were all sent back. Old Sun and three neighbours also declined a mare.

"Why don't you want it? Don't you dare to take it?" Team Leader Hsiao asked him.

"Of course I dare," lied the old carter. "But with a mare, I



Old Sun and three neighbours also declined a mare.



should have to scythe the grass and get up and feed her in the night. I'm too old to do all that. Besides, my legs are bad; I couldn't look after her."

The horses and clothes were left in the schoolhouse. Somebody suggested that they should be kept for the time being, but Hsiao said:

"What for? No, we'll send them back to Han."

When Chao had gone home, Liu Sheng immediately started to roll up his bedding, wrapping it in a Japanese army blanket and taking a rope to tie it with.

"What are you doing?" asked Hsiao.

"I'm quitting," he answered curtly, continuing to fumble with his bedding. He put a finger inside his glasses to wipe off—a bead of sweat or a tear?

"Where are you going to?"

"Back to Harbin. The thing has flopped again and again—it's more than I can stand. Why should I stay here to be frustrated? I didn't come to be frustrated, I came to do mass work."

Hsiao burst out laughing.

"What will you do in Harbin? If we can't do our work well in the country, how can we hold Harbin? If we can't hold the city, where will you go?"

"Farther eastward and still farther till I get to the east bank of the River Ussuri."

"You've got it all worked out quite smoothly," Team Leader Hsiao answered. He would have liked to say: "You certainly know how to look out for yourself," but he was afraid of hurting Liu's feelings too much. He had met a good many petty-bourgeois intellectuals like Liu Sheng who had joined the revolution. They often had the best intentions but could easily get impulsive and pessimistic. They could win victories but did not know how to take reverses. If anything did not go smoothly, they would be upset and depressed and develop a wrong tendency. He, therefore, advised Liu Sheng in a serious and yet mild tone:

"No, Comrade. Your plan is entirely ill-considered. If you alone leave here to go to a safe place, do you mean you wouldn't care any more whether the people here should fall into the clutches of Chiang Kai-shek and the U.S. imperialists, who would usher in another puppet regime? In mass work, just as in any other revo-

lutionary work, the secret of success lies in the ability to stick it out and to wait. The masses aren't like so many wisps of dry straw—put a match to it and you can start a fire. How many days have we been here? A mere four days and nights. But the peasantry has been ground down and deceived by the landlords for thousands of years—for thousands of years, mind you!” Hsiao stopped short. He had a little weakness—he could easily be excited by his own words. Now his voice was rather choked. He hurried to change the subject.

“Well, think it over carefully. If you must go back to Harbin, we can't keep you here. In Harbin, unless you don't go in for any work, you'll still come across difficulties. Where there's work, there's difficulty. What's revolutionary work but a ceaseless overcoming of difficulties?”

Liu Sheng said nothing, but he did not go on with his packing.

Hsiao suddenly realized that Little Wang was missing, and went out in search of him. Little Wang had slipped out, and sat down outside a shack to the east of the schoolhouse, leaning against a wheat rick. He was burning with anger against the masses, against White Goatee, against his leader too.

“Why he should have let go of Han is more than I can understand! He isn't going by the May Fourth Directives of the Party. Is he compromising with the landlords?” When he saw Team Leader Hsiao coming, he quickly turned his head and looked the other way.

“What are you doing here?” Team Leader Hsiao sat down beside him.

“Team Leader!” Little Wang addressed Hsiao by his official title instead of calling him “Old Hsiao” or “Comrade Hsiao” as usual. “What I don't understand is why you let the man go free.”

“Afraid of him,” Hsiao chuckled.

“The way we manage things here, we're not only afraid of him, we're surrendering to him altogether,” Little Wang fumed. “If you're going to go on this way, I'm leaving tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Why not today? Liu Sheng's leaving today—why don't you go with him?” Team Leader Hsiao began jokingly, then stood up and continued in a serious tone: “I could easily have kept Han in custody—or even put a bullet through him. But the point is—have the masses risen? They must act of their own

accord. If we can't work patiently on the masses so that they take their destiny into their own hands and level the feudalistic strongholds to the ground, we can't overthrow feudalism. We can kill one landlord Han, but there are other landlords."

"You let him go. Are you sure he won't escape?" Little Wang asked, looking up at Team Leader Hsiao.

"I think not, he's very pleased with himself. He hopes that we'll leave. Even if he were to run away, we could get him back sooner or later. Once the people are really aroused, no matter if he were a spirit riding on wind and fire, he couldn't slip through the net spread by the people."

Little Wang was satisfied with Team Leader Hsiao's words, which clearly reflected his confidence in victory. At once his annoyance with Hsiao vanished. He got to his feet and sauntered out with his leader along the road, skirting a willow grove. Team Leader Hsiao asked him:

"At the meeting today, did you notice a young man who spoke—he wore a vest patched in many different colours?"

"Chao Yu-lin told me his name is Kuo Chuan-hai, who used to work in Han's house. He's working as hired hand now for Li Chen-chiang."

"Well, he strikes me as a proper peasant. Suppose you go and have a chat with him tomorrow."

When they got back to the schoolhouse, supper was ready.

After supper, the Party branch of the work team held a meeting at which the erroneous ideas of Liu Sheng and Little Wang received severe criticism.

IX

LITTLE Wang and Chao went out to look for Kuo, and found him by Li Chen-chiang's well, where he was watering a horse. His white teeth flashed in a smile as he hailed Chao. Barefoot and wearing his patched vest, he was drawing up a bucketful of water, and Little Wang went to help turn the windlass. After Chao had introduced them to each other, he said:

"You two have a chat. I've got some work to do."

Then he walked away. Kuo poured the water into a stone

trough. Standing beside the stallion, and stroking its well-clipped greyish mane, he began chatting with Little Wang.

Just then there came a man leading a mare past the well, and the grey stallion neighed, broke loose, and made for the mare. Kuo ran after it, vaulted upon its slippery back, held on to its mane with both hands, and pressed its sides and belly with his legs. The animal jumped, kicked, and snorted, but Kuo stuck on its back till it tired, gave in, and walked back to the trough. He leaped down, replaced the halter, and started leading the horse back, saying to Little Wang:

"He's a bit wild, but he works hard and is young. He's full of strength. Look at his legs—smooth and straight as a bench. Time he was gelded."

They strolled back, commenting on the horse, and soon reached Li's house. It was roomy and clean, fenced in by a wooden palisade. The north wing consisted of five rooms; on its right were a mill and a barn, on its left a kitchen and a stable. After closing the horse in the stall, Kuo showed his guest into his room, a lean-to adjoining the stable. The small earthen *kang* was bare except for some loose litter straw and two tattered gunny-bags, which represented all his property.

"May I move over and live with you here?" Little Wang asked.

"You're welcome, if you don't mind living in this hole with me."

Later in the day, Little Wang brought along his baggage-roll. From that day on he lived with Kuo, and they were together all the time, except for meals, which Little Wang had in the schoolhouse. Both young and with much in common, they soon became fast friends. On the farm and in the vegetable garden Little Wang helped Kuo with mowing, crushing bean-cakes for fertilizer, feeding pigs, and doing odd jobs. Chatting together day and night, Little Wang came to learn a lot about Kuo.

Kuo was only twenty-four, but wrinkles were already visible around the corners of his eyes. From his birth up to twelve years, he had never had a pair of trousers on. His mother died when he was eight. His father hired himself out to Han as a farmhand and took the boy along, when he was thirteen, as a stable hand. One New Year's Eve, while the landlord was playing cards, he called cheerfully to old Kuo from his *kang*:

"Old Kuo, come on and make a hand. We're playing for small stakes."

"I can't play," the old peasant laughed, waving his hand politely. Han jumped off the *kang*, seized old Kuo by the arm, and said with a scowl:

"If I condescend to ask you, how dare you refuse!"

"I meant no offence, sir. I really don't know how to play," old Kuo muttered nervously, forcing a smile.

"Never mind. You won't lose, I can assure you. Because you're green at it, you'll be so much the luckier. Go in and win. Come on, Brother."

It was impossible for old Kuo to refuse. At first all went well, and he even won a little. But having worked hard all day, he was tired out; and towards morning his head was swimming and he could hardly keep his eyes open. "I must drop out," he said, and wanted to go.

"What!" Han glared at him. "Cash and carry? How clever! I tell you—no! Play on till dawn."

The old man played on in a daze, lost all he had won, and was rooked of a whole year's wages—the one hundred and ninety-five dollars and fifty cents he and his son had earned. He went back to his lean-to, angry and ashamed, and the next day he fell ill. He had to keep to his bed, panting, coughing, and groaning from the pain in his chest.

Han told his bodyguard Li Ching-shan:

"I don't understand why he should be ill on New Year's Day of all days. Tell him to leave off this groaning!"

Within a fortnight old Kuo was in a bad way. One day, it was snowing hard, murky snow darkening the sky; the north wind howled, battering the huts of the poor. All but the most energetic youngsters kept indoors, warming themselves on the *kang* or by the wall stove, with all the doors and windows closed and frosted. This was a day to freeze off your nose and toes.

In a beaver cap, sitting close to the wall stove, warming his feet over a brass brazier, Han was entertaining the landlord Goodman Tu, his son's father-in-law, when his bodyguard Li ran in and said:

"Old Kuo is dying fast!"

"Carry him outdoors quickly," ordered Han. "Carry him outdoors, I say. Don't let him die inside."

"Don't let him die inside," chimed in Goodman Tu. "His foul breath might contaminate the whole household."

"Go quick and haul him out of his room, out of the house! Hurry up, you fool!" Han shouted. Li dashed out and, in turn, ordered a farmhand, named Chang, to carry old Kuo out. Squatting on the *kang* behind the window, the landlord blew on the pane to melt the frost, and peered through the cleared circle at the courtyard outside. The snow was falling thick and fast and the wind howling more fiercely than ever. He shouted at the top of his voice, rapping on the window:

"Hi, you! Why aren't you carrying him out yet?"

In the lean-to, young Kuo was bending over his father, stroking his chest, when the dying man opened his eyes and muttered:

"It's all up with me, son." He wanted to say more, but his voice failed.

"Get out of the way!" shouted Li, pushing the boy aside. Then he and Chang placed a wide board across the end of the *kang*.

"What are you doing, Uncle Li?" the scared boy asked, wiping his eyes.

"Get on the *kang* and hoist him up by the shoulders," Li ordered the other man, ignoring the boy. In another minute, they were carrying out old Kuo on the board, with the boy trailing behind and crying:

"Uncle Li, Pa will freeze to death outside. Don't carry him out, please."

"Go and beg Mr. Han," Li answered in a tone as icy as the snow which was pelting into the boy's face.

They laid old Kuo down outside the compound gate, in the falling snow and tearing wind. Very soon he was frozen to death.

"Pa!" cried young Kuo, still stroking his dead father's chest, his warm tears dropping down and sinking two holes in the piled-up snow. "Pa, you've died so wretchedly, and left me all alone. What shall I do?"

Farmhands came out from their sheds and the stables, and clustered around the dead man. They said not a word but some wiped their eyes with their sleeves, some said to the boy: "Don't cry, don't cry."

They found nothing else to say. Han was shouting again from behind the window:

"Throw him out! We won't have him howling here!"

Young Kuo stopped crying and kowtowed on the snow to the farmhands who were collecting a little money for the funeral. Later in the day they brought a used wooden case to serve as a coffin, carried it out to north of the village, and lowered it into a grave, which was soon covered with snow. That was in 1934.

Scarcely had the New Year festival passed before the boy Kuo was thrown out of the Han house to shift for himself. He began picking up broken bowls and plucking black currant leaves to sell for a few cents, and doing odd jobs. This way he managed to keep body and soul together. In 1940 he became a farmhand. He had broad and muscular shoulders, worked for all he was worth, and was never idle. Han wanted to make use of him again, and said:

"Young Kuo's a good lad. I knew it even when he was just a little boy. You know the man from the boy, just as a horse is known by its hooves." Han was all smiles. That was like him—when he wanted you to slave for him, he gave you a sweet smile. But when he found no more use for you, he wiped the smile off his face, glared at you, and told you to go to the devil. Young Kuo knew him very well and remembered how his father had died. But the job he had been hoping to get from the landlord Snatcher Tang had just fallen through. And a man has to eat, he can't stay idle. Han took advantage of this.

"You work for me. We're old friends. You'll be given better pay and lighter work here than anywhere else. I'll give you whatever you ask."

"I want six hundred dollars a year." Kuo thought Han would never agree.

"All right, you ask six hundred, and I give six hundred," said the landlord, suddenly generous. "I don't mind making sacrifices."

"Six hundred paid in a lump," young Kuo ventured once more.

"We can discuss that later," parried the cunning landlord.

So young Kuo found himself slaving for Han again. He tried not to recall his father, not to go near that small lean-to in which he had lived, not to stand outside the gate where his father had died. He usually went down to the fields before the cock had crowed, came back after dark, and went to bed after midnight. In rain and wind, he pushed and pulled and strained. But, when the end of the year came, his master did not pay him! Han killed a fat pig and dis-

tributed one half of the pork among the farmhands, young Kuo's share being five pounds.

"Take it to make pork dumplings for New Year's Day. Look, what good pork it is! It's much better than what's sold on the market. They palm old tough stuff off on you."

Young Kuo was reminded of a weasel paying a courtesy visit to a chick. He tried to decline this gift.

"If you refuse, you're treating me with contempt," threatened Han, pursing his lips in displeasure.

"All right, I'll accept," Kuo forced himself to say. So he took the pork to his friend Pai and made dumplings.

After that, young Kuo entered upon the second year of his service under Han's roof. He was not happy about it, but beggars can't be choosers. When his jacket was worn out and hanging in tatters, he decided to make a new one, and went to the landlord's quarters to ask for his last year's wages.

Han looked at him askance, saying:

"What more do you want?"

"All last year I worked for you, from morning till night, in wind and rain!" Young Kuo was furious.

"Didn't you eat my pork? You still want more money?"

When young Kuo heard this, he was struck dumb. He was running to the kitchen to seize a chopper, but the bodyguard blocked his way and shouted:

"What are you doing, you communist?" Under the puppet Manchukuo regime, to label a fellow a communist might cost him his head. Meanwhile, Han had entered the inner room and taken out a loaded gun belonging to the Japanese gendarme officer Morita. He released the safety catch, rushed out and pointed the gun at young Kuo, shouting:

"Don't move, you bastard!"

"Fool!" This was from the bewhiskered Morita, who had strutted out from the inner room too. He stood there, glaring, adding his curses to Han's. The peasant stood helpless, burning with anger.

"Get a move on! Are you waiting for a hiding?" roared the bodyguard from one side. So young Kuo had slaved for fourteen months only to get five pounds of pork. The next day he received the labour conscription order and was dispatched to a camp at

Mishan. He came back after the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945.

Having finished his story, young Kuo said to Little Wang:

"Han is a two-generation enemy of ours—my father's enemy and mine."

"Why, then, at the meeting the other day, didn't you accuse him?" asked Little Wang.

"All his family, all his relatives and friends, supporters and sworn brothers were there, rolling their eyes and trying to scare us. Who dared speak out? One couldn't do much single-handed. A drumstick can't make much noise without a drum."

"Why don't you unite with friends and fight together?" suggested Little Wang. "Join forces with those people who are honest and not double-dealers, people who have grievances against Han. Unity is strength, you know."

"If you want poor men who see eye to eye with us, the first one I think of is Old Pai of the south end," young Kuo said, remembering his good friend.

"Let's go and see him," the land reform worker responded enthusiastically. He jumped off the *kang* and dragged Kuo with him.

Pai, who lived in the south end of the village, had a piece of land which he himself described as a "dry yellow mound which even hares would scorn." During the puppet regime, after he had paid his taxes he had little left to keep his family going. Although he had not enough to eat and wear, he never worried, never hurried. He was a good-hearted and good-tempered man—but at the same time a sluggish, wool-gathering fellow. He never could sleep enough. In rainy weather his neighbours would be worried, fearful of getting behind with their work and having a poor crop. But Pai said defiantly to the sky: "Go on raining, go on raining—what do I care! While you are raining outside, I can sleep peacefully inside."

"If you like, you can sleep, rain or shine. Who can control you? You're your own master," somebody once said. Hearing this, Pai jerked his chin towards the inner room where his wife was. He was a little afraid of his wife because he was lazy and drowsy, while she was able and industrious, a good hand at the scissors while sitting on the *kang*, and a better hand at the sickle while working in the field. In mowing and harvesting she yielded to no man in strength and skill. Because of her ability to get things done and his own inability

to pick bones with her, Pai was defeated in the first battle he fought with her. Whenever he tried to recover his prestige, he licked the dust. After several reverses, he dared not try again. He was overpowered.

One day, when Pai and a few friends were chatting together, a mischievous tongue asked:

"Is there anyone here who is afraid of his wife?"

"Own up. The one who is had better be honest and own up," another urged.

Squatting on the end of the *kang*, Pai was silent and began rolling a cigarette.

"Old Pai!" the first man called his name. "Aren't you afraid of your wife? What do the rest of you say? Is our friend afraid of his wife or not?"

"Be careful what you say!" Pai jumped off the *kang*. "Who am I afraid of? I'm not afraid of anyone!"

At this juncture, who should barge in but his wife, looking for him, a poker in her hand.

"Well, so this is where you are! While you're enjoying yourself here, there's no more water in the vat and no firewood split; but you've plenty of time to visit friends!"

Pai slunk out, mumbling ineffectually. His friends laughed long and loud.

Back in 1935, Pai had come to settle in Yuanmao. He had been a hard worker then, and had cleared fifty *mou* of wasteland. That year the rainfall was favourable and the harvest good. Each *mou* yielded one picul of maize. He began to make his own way, and got married. The next year Landlord Han's horses were loosed to graze on his maize, and ruined a big patch. Because of this, he and Han's lackey Li Ching-shan came to blows. The latter reported to his master, who galloped furiously out on his big black horse to avenge his faithful servant. Spitting fire, he descended upon Pai's hut and with a big cane smashed everything in sight—bowls, pots, pans, jars. Then, without a word he stalked out, hoisted himself upon his steed, and rode off. Pai lodged a complaint at the village government, but it was ignored. Then he presented his case to the county court. Hearing of this action, Han, lolling beside the opium lamp, smiled coldly and observed:

"So he's brought a case against me? Good! I'll just lie here

and deal with him. A few letters to the magistrate won't cost me much. But he—how much money has he?"

The puppet magistrate found Pai guilty of libel against an innocent citizen, and had him thrown into the county prison. His wife had to sell forty *mou* of land to get him out. These forty *mou* fell into Han's hands, and Pai found only a pebbly ten *mou* left. He suddenly became the most indolent of men, and said: "I only want enough to keep alive." He rose every day when the sun was high in the sky. He preferred wet weather to fine, because then he could sleep. On a sunny day he would look up at the sky and sigh: "Look, there isn't the ghost of a cloud in the sky—the old dragon is dying from thirst."

If he happened to be working in the fields, he would lengthen out the noon break. One day his wife brought him lunch and found him sleeping in a furrow in a kaoliang field. One night he failed to come home, and his wife began to worry and set out in search of him, a poker in her hand. He was nowhere to be found. She asked mower, swineherd and carter, but no one had seen him. Throwing down her poker, she appealed to the neighbours to help her search, afraid her husband might have come across a wild bear or slipped into the river. She was really worked up. When the crescent moon was rising above the corner of her hut, her neighbour Old Chao ran in with the good news that her husband was sleeping like a top among the weeds on the river bank. She ran to the place and took him back. She was both glad and angry, and could not make up her mind whether to laugh or cry. That night she did not give him an earful.

Thus Pai became a nonchalant and happy-go-lucky fellow. His wife worried about rice, firewood and salt, till she was worn to a shadow. She had beautiful black arched brows, and she often knitted them over things which were no problem at all. Her husband, however, was quite different. He never worried, never bothered his head about food or clothing. "I only want enough to keep alive," he kept saying. As a matter of fact, they often went hungry and oftener quarrelled. There was an unending conflict between them.

"It's just my luck to live a life of misery with you," she would say.

"With another man you couldn't be any better off. It's in your stars."

"You're such a lazy devil, no wonder you're poor!"

"You work hard, but does it get you anywhere? Where are your chicks? Didn't they all die overnight? And where's your porker?" Pai had no sooner said this than he regretted it. His wife's eyes were already flooding with tears, which coursed down her cheeks. She had bought a sucking pig, meaning to feed it up till it was fat, and sell it at New Year for a little money with which to make herself some new clothes. Every day, carrying her baby boy, Kou-tzu, in her arms, she had sorted out vegetable leaves and mixed them with husks for fodder—she had gone to no end of trouble. By August the pig had filled out. One day, it strayed into Han's garden and trampled down some flowers. The landlord was levelling his fowling-piece at it, when she hurried into the garden with her child in her arms. She gripped his gun, and implored him to pardon her this once.

"Pardon, indeed! How many times have I pardoned you already? If you want to save your pig, you must pay for my flowers." Han swept his gun around and threw her to the ground together with the three-year-old boy. The child's head knocked against a stone, making a deep gash in his right temple which bled profusely. She carried the boy hastily into her kitchen, snatched a handful of ashes from the stove, and applied it to the wound, then sat down on the ground, holding him close to her, and began crying. Then the landlord rushed over again and, this time, bang! he got the pig.

A couple of weeks later, Little Kou-tzu died from excessive bleeding. So a boy and a pig had gone in compensation for Han's flowers. The neighbours came to console them. The boy was in the little coffin, and the mother was crying as if her heart would break, swooning and coming to alternately. Old women tried to comfort her, saying: "You must take care of yourself. You're young—you'll have other children."

Despite all the condolences, she was heart-broken. For three days her neighbours did not see any smoke curling up from her kitchen chimney. All the time she was crying at one end of the *kang* while her husband was moping at the other. Even happy-go-lucky Pai grew thinner.

In the old society, under the puppet regime, there was no end to the sufferings of the poor—sufferings of every sort and description.

One month had passed after the death of Little Kou-tzu. The neighbours had their own cares and worries and were gradually

forgetting the Pai family's misfortune. But Pai and his wife could never forget: the wound in their hearts remained open and unhealed. Little Kou-tzu, so plump and lively, had been their treasure. Every night Pai's wife woke up, crying, and berated her husband for not having gone to court to avenge their child.

"Go to court?" Pai would answer ruefully. "Have you forgotten what happened last time? Do you want me behind bars again?"

As the days passed, they stopped talking about it and began to grieve less. But today Pai's careless mention of the pig in anger brought back the memory of Little Kou-tzu, and she cried again. Pai was sorry, but it was too late. Feeling unhappy himself he took up a hatchet, and stepped into the yard to chop firewood. He split enough fuel to last for three and a half months; then, tired out and perspiring, he felt better. He wiped off the beads of sweat on his forehead with the sleeve of his black tattered jacket and stepped back into the room. His wife was still crying on the *kang*, her body shaken with sobs.

"Is Old Pai in?" called somebody from the yard.

"Yes. Is that you, Kuo?" Pai answered, going out to meet Kuo. Seeing his friend accompanied by a land reform worker, he ushered them into the room.

His wife had stopped crying and sat up on the *kang*, turning her face to the window and wiping her eyes. Kuo saw this and asked:

"What's the matter, Mrs. Pai? Is it another *struggle* with Old Pai?" Kuo was beginning to use the new political terminology which he had lately picked up from Little Wang.

"Mind your own business," said Pai, and asked them to sit down. He produced a basketful of tobacco leaves of his own growing, rolled a cigarette, and offered it to Little Wang. His wife got off the *kang*, picked out a few fresh plums from a wooden case, and placed them on a low-legged table. Then she took out a tattered jacket and began darning it, bending her head.

After a little casual talk between the three men, Little Wang got down to brass tacks:

"We poor men must unite to struggle against the pot-belly—I mean Han Number Six. Will you join us? Have you the guts?"

"Why not?" Pai answered, and his wife shot a glance at him. "Don't look at me like that. What do women know about men's affairs?"

His wife was feeling a little better now. She said to Kuo:

"Do you think him good for anything? Every day, when the sun is already ten feet high on the wall, he's still lolling on the *kang*. He can't take proper care of his land, how can he work for a common cause? Don't count on him."

"Mrs. Pai, don't underestimate your husband!" protested Kuo.

"Do you think we ought to tackle Han, Old Pai?" Little Wang asked.

"Ask my wife what she thinks," said Pai, curling up on the *kang* and puffing at his cigarette.

His wife jerked up her head again at the mention of Han, and answered:

"Why not blow his brains out? If you do, you'll be avenging my Little Kou-tzu!"

"Who's Little Kou-tzu?" Little Wang asked.

She immediately told him the tragic story from beginning to end.

"If we tackle Han," he asked her, "will you accuse him in public?"

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

"I've never done it before. I'm afraid I couldn't speak well."

"Aren't you two always arguing with each other?" Kuo reasoned.

"But that's different."

"What you can't say, get Old Pai to say for you," put in Kuo. "That's settled."

Then Little Wang and Kuo left them and returned to the little room in Li Chen-chiang's house. They continued talking from late evening till the cock crowed.

X

THE villagers of Yuanmao organized a Peasants' Association in Chao Yu-lin's hut. It started with a nucleus of thirty-odd poor peasants, hired labourers, and artisans. Chao was elected chairman and concurrently chief of the organization committee; Kuo, vice-chairman and concurrently chief of the land distribution committee; Pai was in charge of the militia and chief of the anti-traitor committee; Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, was chief of the production committee. The whole membership was divided into groups, Old Sun and Tien

Wan-shun being among the group leaders. It was decided that all the group leaders and key members should get in touch with more impoverished peasants—those who could see eye to eye with each other—and enlist them as members. Within three days they succeeded in contacting a number of new men—young men contacting young men, old men contacting old men. The five new members of Old Sun's group were all carters.

"Birds of a feather flock together!" Team Leader Hsiao observed with a smile. When Old Sun came up, he added in jest: "Old Sun, you've drawn around you a group of carters. If you were made head of the association, I suppose you'd turn it into a carters' association!"

"Didn't you tell us to look for men who can see eye to eye with us? Well, I can only see eye to eye with poor carters," Sun explained.

Team Leader Hsiao and the heads of the various committees discussed things and decided to reshuffle the groups, and change some of the group leaders who were not suitable. Young Kuo and Pai were made concurrent group leaders. Young and capable, they were like bright torches setting alight the whole village.

Kuo was twenty-four, four years younger than Pai, but he looked older and thinner. After Kuo was elected vice-chairman of the Peasants' Association, Little Wang left his place and moved back to the schoolhouse. As he was leaving, he told Kuo: "Rally more poor men, more and more." Kuo then found a new man named Yang Fu-yuan, generally known as Little Yang. Formerly a farmhand for six months under Han, he was now a dealer in rags and bones. He was still quite young, but he had two great weaknesses—he was cowardly and fond of small advantages.

"Can the Eighth Route Army stay long?" he once asked Kuo privately.

"Who told you they couldn't?" his friend countered.

"Nobody told me. I was just wondering," hedged Little Yang. As a matter of fact, he had been told by Long-neck Han.

"Yang, if we poor men want to stand up, it's up to us to make the effort. Our Chairman Chao says: 'Earth sticks to earth and makes a wall, poor men stick to poor men and together overthrow a kingdom.' If we peasants unite, we need be afraid of nothing. So why should we worry whether the Eighth Route Army will be here long or not?"

"That's right," agreed Little Yang, but he was unconvinced.

"Very well then, you'll rally more men, won't you?" his friend advised, then left him.

Vice-chairman of the Peasants' Association, Kuo was the busiest of men; he hadn't a minute to himself. He was forever talking to all kinds of people, explaining this, that and the other. If he could not straighten out a point himself, he took it to Little Wang or Team Leader Hsiao for elucidation. He told the villagers that the world was divided into two big families, one rich and the other poor, and that if the poor wanted to stop being poor and stand up, they must first do away with the landlords. All this might be a commonplace now, but coming from him it sank easily into the minds of his listeners.

Different villagers received Kuo in different ways.

"Brother Kuo," an impoverished peasant said in a friendly tone, "you say the Eighth Route Army won't leave us, but what about the work team?"

"They won't leave either," he answered confidently.

"Today we farmhands hold the trumps. This is a real turnover. Brother Kuo, we support you," the farmhands declared.

"'Each for all and all for each,'" Kuo quoted Little Wang's words for answer, feeling elated and smiling. He had the warm support of poor peasants and farmhands. But he also came up against jealousy and taunts, flattery and threats.

"Chairman Kuo is fine, I think he's even more capable than Chairman Chao." All the flatterers called him chairman instead of vice-chairman. "Come and see us some evening."

"Can a chairman still remember common men? He's up on top; we couldn't reach him even with a ladder," those who were jealous said.

"He's a mole cricket in a long gown and styles himself a gentleman," a landlord said sarcastically.

"He may be swaggering about now, but when the Kuomintang army comes back he can't escape even if he runs like a hare." sniggered some bad elements, formerly members of the interim puppet village administration.

Kuo kept his eyes skinned and knew only too well who were saying such things. Born and brought up here, he knew which villagers were good and which were bad, how this one had prospered

and how that one had been impoverished. He acquainted the land reform workers with the local conditions and in turn learned a great deal from them, including the new phraseology. Because he knew how to convince people, because Comrade Wang of the work team had stayed with him, and because he was now vice-chairman of the Peasants' Association, he was much sought after. On rainy days, Kuo's room swarmed with people. Even ragged old women and young mothers carrying babies in their arms came in twos and threes for the latest news.

It was a sunny day, a day for mowing. Kuo in a straw-hat and shouldering a hoe was leaving for the fields, when Long-neck Han ran into him beside a wood pile outside the gate and tugged at his tattered jacket.

"What do you want?" Kuo asked.

"I can't tell you here. Let's walk down to the south garden," Long-neck Han whispered.

"It's all right here. Out with it. I'm in a hurry."

"This morning," muttered Long-neck furtively, "Mr. Han said you work so hard for the community, yet without making a cent. You even miss your meals. How can you work on an empty stomach? He told me to bring you this money—take it as a friendly gesture." He shoved a sheaf of banknotes into Kuo's pocket and turned to go. The latter called him back and flung the banknotes at his long neck. A timely puff of wind sent the notes flying in all directions.

"Who wants your dirty money!" Kuo lifted his hoe, and Long-neck turned pale and ran for his life, sinking his long neck between his shoulders. The onlookers laughed and applauded. An elderly man said to Kuo, thumbs up:

"Good! That's the style!"

"Why didn't you give him a kick too?" said another.

Meanwhile urchins were running along the ditches and through the willow grove, chasing the windfall of money.

The next day the village was full of rumours again.

"Kuo's recruiting women for the Eighth Route Army."

"Girls and good-looking young wives are all wanted."

"What do they want women for?"

"Who knows? They say the women will be sent to other provinces, put in ration shops and rationed to any men for the asking."

"Now I see why Kuo has been asking: How many people have

you in your family? Have you all enough to eat? How many women are there in your family and how old are they? All the time he's been like a weasel paying a visit to a chick."

The day after these rumours were spread, Kuo's room, which had been so crowded, became deserted. Even on rainy days, when there was no work in the fields, nobody called on Kuo.

And when he went out to call on people, he found a cold reception. Seeing him coming from afar, they would close their doors. Some said that a child was having smallpox and no visitors could be admitted. Some stuck a red cloth on the closed window as a sign that a woman was lying in and visitors were unwelcome. Bewildered and in the dumps, Kuo wandered to the schoolhouse, sat on the floor, leaned against the wall and hung his head.

"What's wrong with you?" Team Leader Hsiao asked, and Little Wang stepped up.

"I can't carry on," said Kuo. "Say what you like, I can't make a go of it here. I may try some other place, but not here."

"What's all this about?" Team Leader Hsiao appealed to Little Wang.

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Little Wang equally perplexed.

"They're avoiding me!" Kuo said.

"What did you say?" exclaimed Hsiao, nonplussed.

"They don't come to see me, and when I go to see them they close their doors on me."

Team Leader Hsiao frowned thoughtfully for a while. Then he asked Kuo all the details. Putting two and two together, he came to the conclusion that the reactionary elements were stirring up trouble, and advised Kuo:

"Go and talk it over with Chairman Chao and the fellows you're closest to, then come and tell me what's behind all this." He added encouragingly: "We can never accomplish anything without a fight. A well can't be sunk by merely driving a spade into the earth—it's a slow and laborious process."

Thus encouraged, Kuo went to see Chao, and found him in low spirits too, also boycotted by the villagers. Together, acting on Hsiao's advice, they went to look up their close friends and neighbours, chatted with them, and finally understood the reason for the cold treatment they had received.

"Don't believe a word those reactionaries say! It's a thumping lie!" Kuo exclaimed.

And Old Tien responded:

"The work team came all the way from south of the Great Wall to help us poor folk to stand up. Everything about them is above board. If they wanted women, they could find any number in Harbin. Why look for any in this village?"

"Take Team Leader Hsiao for example. What a fine man he is!" Chao had hardly finished before Old Sun joined in:

"You're right. He's one in a thousand, and so are Comrades Wang and Liu. Who wants your women? Comrade Wang comes from our province too. One day I said to him: 'You're a credit to our province.' What do you think he said to me? He said: 'You're the real credit to our province. You're a good driver, and you're moving ahead along the revolutionary road.' Team Leader Hsiao is friends with us carters too. Everybody knows that it was I who first drove him and his team to this village. I remember he asked me on the road: 'Old Sun, do you agree that poor men should stand up?' I replied: 'Why not? Who wants to be downtrodden and on all fours all his life?' He smiled and said: 'If our Old Sun agrees, our revolution will surely succeed.' I assured him: 'Honestly, I've the courage. It's that courage that makes me go south and north.'"

"Well, you've a clever tongue, but you didn't have the courage to take the horse the other day!" Chao cornered him good-humouredly, and all laughed heartily.

"That! Well—" Old Sun answered evasively. "Don't interrupt me. I say Team Leader Hsiao is a good man and I like to make friends with a good man. Last night I told him: 'If you want to go to the county town one of these mornings, let me drive you and I can guarantee no sticking in the mud or jerking.'"

Talk and laughter helped the village people to see things in a true perspective. The damaging rumours vanished just as wisps of smoke disappear directly they rise out of the chimney. And once again men and women, old and young, started going to Kuo and Chao to chat or ask them the news.

Li Chen-chiang, Kuo's employer, was greatly annoyed to see his farmhand on such intimate terms with the land reform workers, with so many people coming to him every day for advice and

calling him vice-chairman. But he took care to hide his feelings. One night he sneaked into the Han mansion to report all the details about his farmhand.

"He does all this under your nose, fine!" said Han. "That means you can easily keep an eye on him. Find out what they are up to, and let me know."

Li Chen-chiang went home. With a short pipe in his mouth and a smile on his face, he walked slowly across the courtyard towards Kuo's quarters. Through the open window the poor peasants could see him coming and they immediately fell silent, so that Li could hear nothing. Thwarted, Li cursed Kuo inwardly:

"Let's wait and see!"

One day, Kuo returned late in the evening from a meeting, and found the house gate locked and bolted. There was no answer despite his repeated knocks. By the light of the stars, he groped his way to the ditch below the fence, leaped over the ditch, and nimbly climbed over the willow fence. But scarcely had he put one foot down inside, when a fierce watchdog, evidently unleashed for the purpose, sprang out from under the eaves and tore a piece of flesh off his ankle.

The morning after Kuo had been bitten by the dog, he was having breakfast in the outhouse when Li's little girl broke a bowl. Mrs. Li put down the chopsticks with a thump, leaned over the low table, and slapped her across the face. The little girl turned on the waterworks.

"Little bastard!" her mother cursed. "Stop that crying! You don't do a stroke of work all day, just eat and loaf. We're a farming family and live in a small way. How can we keep a loafer? You eat and drink your fill, then out you go visiting people. You certainly have a fine time."

Kuo heard these taunts. He put down his chopsticks and wanted to explode. But he controlled himself, and said calmly:

"Mrs. Li, don't point at the chicken and curse the dog. Who is it eats and loafs? Whom are you swearing at? You had better make your meaning clear."

"Whom am I cursing? If the cap fits, wear it!" roared the woman. Her shouts and the child's whimpering soon brought a crowd of curious spectators into the outhouse, while children were peeping into the room through the cracks in the papered window.

Kuo stood up, quivering with rage, but the strength of will bred by long hardships enabled him to subdue his anger. He bit his lips, and said after a pause:

"Do I eat and loaf? I must get this clear. Day in and day out, I work like a horse. Directly I stop ploughing, I start hoeing. When I hang up the hoe, I take up the sickle. I mow the grass, cut the wheat, fix the trellises, sluice the fields, rebuild the *kang*, and plaster the wall. After that it's time for harvesting and hauling logs. Then I hatchel the hemp, chop hay, fetch water, refloor the pigsty, push the grindstone, split firewood, sieve grain. My hands are never idle from one end of the year to the other. You rent over two hundred *mou* of land, and every inch of every *mou* is wet by my sweat. Yet you stand there and say I'm not worth my salt. Put your hand to your breast and see if a heart still beats there or not!"

"Listen, neighbours, do you hear what he's mouthing?" she shrilled. "Just two days as vice-chairman, and we people must kowtow to you and make offerings, eh?" Her husband stepped out of his room, and she rammed her head into his chest, seized him by the collar, and shook him back and forth. "You devil! You stand quietly by, watching me being insulted by your hired hand. Do you pay him just to torment me to death? What's the idea?"

Some of the neighbours pushed Kuo out and said:

"Don't argue with her. Go and get on with your work."

Kuo strode towards the gate. Fearing that he was going to the work team, Li Chen-chiang ran after him, calling:

"Say, where are you going?" When Kuo neither answered nor looked back, Li added:

"Don't tell the work team about this. What happened in the family can be settled in the house. I'll make her apologize to you later."

Seething with anger, Kuo was going to appeal to the work team. They would comfort him, advise him, and perhaps help find a place for him to live, he thought.

After chatting with him for a time, Team Leader Hsiao asked him:

"Who is Pei Lai?"

"A bandit chief, they say," he answered, surprised at this sudden remark from the team leader.

"Have you ever met him?"

"Never." Kuo felt there was something behind this, and asked: "What do you mean, Team Leader?"

"I was planning to see you, to show you this thing," Team Leader Hsiao said with a smile, and pulled out of his pocket a slip of paper which had a few words scrawled on it. Since Kuo could not read, Hsiao read out for him:

"Kuo is a spy in the employ of Pei Lai of Taching Mountain." It was an anonymous letter.

"Team Leader Hsiao, please look into this. . . ."

"I've already done so."

"If you believe this, better send me to gaol."

Kuo had been feeling angry with the Li woman, and now here was this false accusation out of the blue. His eyes smarted and he felt a lump in his throat. He bowed his head.

"If I believed it, I'd have taken you into custody long ago." Team Leader Hsiao came closer and answered with a smile. Then he told Kuo that three days before he had discovered this paper on the window-sill. The handwriting was identical with that on the invitation card from Han, so it must be another of his tricks.

"You just go ahead, and pay no attention to them. It's time you fought back," the team leader concluded, trying to comfort and spur him on simultaneously.

Kuo said very little, and did not mention Mrs. Li's attack on him. He rose to go. After the rain the road was muddy, but he just paddled along instead of keeping to the side.

"The reactionaries might have done for me, but for Team Leader Hsiao." As he splashed through the puddles, he was more determined to fight back. "I'll follow the Communists and fight the reactionaries to the end even if it costs me my life." Before he knew it, he had reached the Li house. Not wanting to go in, he turned off and walked south until he found himself in Pai's house.

"Is Brother Pai home?"

Mrs. Pai was in, washing the dishes. She did not look very happy. She was knitting her beautiful black brows and pulling a long face. She looked up and answered:

"He's out."

"Where's he gone?"

"Who knows? And who cares?"

Seeing that his friend's wife was in a strange mood, Kuo backed out. He was wandering down the road, when Chao Yu-lin called to him.

"Come along to my house. I want your advice about something." He looked at Kuo and, finding him so blue, asked in surprise: "What's the matter with you?"

"I can't find anywhere to live," answered Kuo. "Li Chen-chiang's wife has thrown me out."

"Come and live with us," Chao suggested.

"Live with you? Where will the grub come from?"

"I've a peck of mixed grain and bran left. So long as we have something to eat, we won't let you go hungry."

So Chao settled Kuo in his house. In the evening Team Leader Hsiao came over and found that Kuo had no bedding to speak of—only that patched and repatched colourful vest. When he went back, Hsiao sent Wan over with a half-worn shirt and a Japanese army blanket. The messenger asked:

"Do you know where Pai is? Team Leader Hsiao wants to see him."

"I don't know," said Kuo.

Where had Pai gone?

XI

As captain of the village militia, Pai was practically rushed off his feet. He often went out before dawn and came back after midnight. He had been rather slothful and sluggish, disliking hustle and bustle. He had always said: "What's the hurry? Take it easy. Tomorrow the sun is sure to rise again, and no dog will bite it off." Now he was a new man, no flies on him. He was always making plans for getting things done. Neighbours who knew what he had been like would say to him teasingly: "Brother Pai, what's the hurry? Rest a while. The sun is sure to rise again tomorrow, and it won't be bitten off by a dog." "No, I can't rest just now," Pai would answer earnestly. "I must take time by the forelock."

No one was happier than his wife. She had three hens laying eggs and often treated her husband to poached eggs when he came home late having missed his supper. For dinner she went all out

to give him satisfaction, what with cabbage, oil, corn pie, and even dried beancurd. Every meal was as good as a harvest tuck-out! At night she would sit up for him. They were happy as newly-weds! She told her neighbours that the work team had worked wonders, making hard workers out of loafers. "Heaven has opened its eyes for once, and sent along Team Leader Hsiao to save us."

One day, when Pai had gone out, she gathered a basketful of fresh beans from her vegetable patch. It occurred to her that she might make a present of them to the work team as a token of her gratitude. So she combed her hair before the mirror and put on her best blue jacket, which had only four or five patches on it. She carefully placed ten fresh eggs on top of the beans and set out. On the way, she met Long-neck Han, who stood aside respectfully and asked her with a smile:

"Where are you going, Mrs. Pai?"

This man was a rascal, she knew. Her husband had told her about him. But like all women she was easily taken in, and when he smiled and spoke in such a friendly way, she answered:

"I'm paying a visit to the work team. They're new here; I'm taking them some fresh beans and eggs. They're working for us, so we ought to express our thanks and see to it that they have fresh vegetables to eat."

"Who says they're working for us?"

"My husband told me."

"That's right," Long-neck admitted, remembering that she was reconciled with her husband now, and never quarrelled. But then, afraid he had conceded too much, after a furtive look round, when he saw there was no one in sight, he whispered:

"Mrs. Pai, do you know. . . ?"

"Know what?"

"You really don't?" he pretended to be surprised, and stopped short.

"What is it? Do tell me," she urged.

"I hear that Team Leader Hsiao thinks Brother Pai. . . . Ah! I had better keep quiet. If I told you, you might blame me." He shilly-shallied and shuffled his feet as if to go off.

"Out with it," she insisted. "I won't blame you. I would, if you kept it from me."

"Very well, I'll tell you, then. Team Leader Hsiao likes Brother

Pai very much for being young and progressive. Brother Pai says: 'But my wife is conservative— isn't it just too bad?' Now listen to what Team Leader Hsiao says: 'That doesn't matter. Do your work well, and I'll find you a nice girl. I know of one in the neighbourhood, and I'll arrange the match for you.'

"Oh! Match whom with whom?" she gasped, her head swimming.

"He'll match Brother Pai with a nice girl, he says."

"Aha!" she fumed, knitting her brows. "I ask you, who's the girl?"

"That I can't tell you." Seeing that she believed him, Long-neck tried to look even more secretive. Piqued and flushed, she turned to go, but he wouldn't let her.

"Why are you turning homeward? Aren't you sending the beans and eggs to the team leader? If you don't want to send them yourself, I'll go for you."

"I'd rather throw them into the river than have that Hsiao eat them! You'd better go on your way." She pushed Long-neck aside, and walked home with her basket, cursing the work team and her husband under her breath.

At midnight, Pai came home from the schoolhouse, sopping with rain. There was no light in the room—his wife had gone to bed. He pushed open the door and found the kitchen dark and cold with no boiling pot on the fire. He went into the inner room, struck a match to light the oil lamp, pulled off his dripping clothes, and spread them over the *kang*. Then he walked back to the kitchen. He found the empty pot hanging above the stove, and there was nothing at all in the cupboard. He deliberately closed it with a slam, hoping to wake up his wife, so that she would get him something to eat, but the noise failed to stir her.

"I say, where are the eggs?" They had been on good terms lately and not had a quarrel for a long time. He was not angry, only hungry.

"You want eggs, eh!" his wife sneered, sitting up. "Think I don't know the way you loaf about all day outside, up to no good?"

"Get up and get me something to eat, so that I can go to sleep. I have to get up early tomorrow," he explained, hunting round for his eggs. He came upon a basketful of beans and eggs, picked it up and was walking into the other room, when his wife sprang up and lunged for the basket.

"No, you can't eat those eggs," she shrilled.

"Why not?" he retorted, exasperated. Then they started quarrelling and snatching the basket from each other, till all the eggs fell out and cracked on the floor, spattering them and the ground. In the silent night the noise was heard far and wide and drew some wakeful neighbours out of their beds—some came for the pleasure of watching a fight, some to mediate out of a good heart.

"Well, well, stop now! Husband and wife shouldn't quarrel," an old man preached.

"Do stop quarrelling. Least said, soonest mended," a relative piped.

"That's enough," said another well-meaning neighbour. "It can't be as serious as all that."

"Thunderclap for thunderclap in the sky, blow for blow in the bedroom!" Come on, let's have some more!" shouted someone who had come to watch the fun.

"Good neighbours," appealed Mrs. Pai, "please say who's right and who's wrong. He leaves all the chores to me while he potters about himself having a good time. Did you ever see the likes of him? He never stays at home long—he says he must go out to work, to do propaganda, to fight the landlords and avenge Little Kou-tzu. But it's all a lie! The truth is, he's chasing after girls. He's tired of me. The trouble is, he never looks at himself in a mirror. I wonder what girl would take a scarecrow like him!"

"What the hell!" Pai realized that he was the victim of slander, and seething with anger darted at her. "You bitch! Must you loose your tongue at this hour of the night?" He lifted his fist, and she sailed plump into his arms, crying: "Go ahead, beat me! I want to die, I want to die." She sobbed and chanted at the same time: "Oh, my Little Kou-tzu, how your mama suffers! Why did you leave me behind?" The situation was becoming quite serious, when a hefty fellow, stripped to the waist, stepped forward and dragged Pai out into the courtyard, saying: "Come over to my place. Don't argue with a woman. You're making a fool of yourself, and losing face for all of us poor men."

This hefty fellow was one of Pai's best friends. His name was Li, and he called himself Chang-yu (Man of Property). He had given himself this name because he had never had any property in the world except himself, and he wanted to defy and exasperate

the god of wealth. In fact, since taking this name, he had often had no fire in the stove, no smoke in the chimney, no rice in the pot, no quilt on the *kang*. In short, he was poor and became progressively poorer. Aged about thirty, he had been a blacksmith for fourteen years and was still unmarried. Because of his height and bulk, his friends also called him Big Li. "Big Li!" folks would ask him: "You've been working half your life—why is it you still don't have a wife?"

"I don't even have bran to eat," he would answer. "What woman would want to share my ill luck?"

In late autumn of 1941, when the weather was turning frosty, the Japanese clerk Miya of the village government had served on him the labour conscription order, and Big Li agreed to go at once, saying: "All right, all right, I'm glad to serve the government."

The Japanese was pleased and said:

"You're very straightforward. You don't argue at all. Now go home and pack up. Tomorrow you must go."

That evening Big Li did not sleep, and people could hear him moving about with his tools during the night. The next morning, when the sun rose high in the sky, his door was still closed. Big Li was gone. Hammer and anvil, pots and pans, he had buried in the ground. The room was empty except for a wooden rack and a pair of worn straw-sandals on the floor.

Big Li had carried away a hoe and an axe. He had slipped through the South Gate and run some six or seven miles, then stopped and crept under a kaoliang rick, sticking out his feet, which were soon white with frost. He had shivered till dawn.

Finally he settled down in a pine grove in the southern mountains, where his axe and hoe stood him in good stead—he got wood, grass and earth, and rigged up a shelter. During the day, fearing people might come for him, he lay hidden in the forest where he could see but not be seen; during the night he slept in his shelter, secure from wind and rain. One night while lying awake on his bunk, he heard a queer hissing, stretched out a hand to feel, and touched a long, slender, cold, slippery thing. His heart missed a beat, but the thing wriggled away into the grass without hurting him. It was a big snake.

It was autumn, and he found plenty to eat in the mountain—

wild apples and pears, black currants, sloes, hazel-nuts and mushrooms. He made occasional excursions to distant farms to pick up potatoes and maize left over after harvest. During the winter that followed he fed on pheasants and partridges. If he was lucky, he even caught a roebuck. He would live off it for a couple of weeks and use its skin on the bunk. In spring there were all sorts of wild vegetables. So he managed for about a year. He made a clearing and sowed it with maize and potatoes. After the Japanese army surrendered, he returned to the village.

When the Peasants' Association was established, Pai had called on Big Li and talked with him for a whole night, suggesting that he join it. "Let me think it over," Li replied. He thought for another whole night, and two days later told his friend:

"It isn't that I don't want to join the Peasants' Association, Old Pai, but I don't want just to drift with the stream. I want to put on my own thinking cap and wait for my own little idea to pop up."

"Has your idea popped up already?" asked Pai with a grin.

"Yes, and it's this: even if they cut off my head for it, I'm going to follow the Communist Party."

Then Big Li joined the Peasants' Association and was elected group leader.

That night, after he had taken Pai home with him, he asked him what had caused his quarrel with his wife.

"I've not the slightest idea."

Big Li laughed:

"You quarrelled all that time without knowing what it was all about! You're as big a nitwit as ever. Now it'll soon be dawn, we'd better get something to eat. Then I'll go and explain to your wife."

Li went on in a low and earnest tone: "You know, the poor should help each other just as the rich help each other. You're an officer of the Peasants' Association and it's your duty to lead the poor in the struggle. How can you quarrel and give outside people a chance to laugh at us? Come on, you get some beans and cucumbers from the garden, while I light the fire for breakfast."

After breakfast, leaving Pai to wait in his hut, Big Li hurried off to see Pai's wife. She was just pouring slops into the trough in the courtyard, to feed a little white and black pig. She saw Big Li coming in through the gate, but bent her head as if she hadn't

seen him, to stir the pig slops with a stick. The morning sun, throwing its golden beams through the willow branches, made the silver pins in her loose hair sparkle.

"Mrs. Pai!" Big Li greeted her as he approached. She jerked up her head, gave him a glance, and looked down again. Her anger had not worn off, and her pretty black eyebrows were still drawn together.

"That little pig is well built. By the end of the year it'll be more than two hundred catties."

"Maybe," she answered coldly, without looking up. She was still angry with her husband and, to a lesser degree, with his friend for poking his nose into her affairs. He shouldn't have taken her husband away before she could get everything off her chest. When she had finished stirring the slops, she pursed her lips, took up the pail, and started into the house. Big Li followed her. He had come to act as peacemaker, but couldn't for the life of him think what to say. In the room his eyes fell upon a black jacket on the *kang*, which reminded him of Pai's semi-naked state. On the spur of the moment, he fibbed:

"Old Pai's got a splitting headache. He was drenched and frozen last night."

"Serves him right!" said Mrs. Pai, sitting down on the *kang*, and taking up her sewing. Big Li sat himself down on the other end of the *kang* and took refuge in rolling a cigarette, while mentally busy trying to find some way out of the awkward situation. After making a few remarks at random, he said:

"I remember you had a fat porker the year before last. How many catties did it weigh when you sold it at the end of the year?"

"Oh, it wasn't alive at the end of the year!" she answered. "During autumn, Han Number Six killed it with his shotgun." She remembered the train of misfortunes which had befallen her, and her eyes filled with tears. She was thinking of Little Kou-tzu. Big Li, who knew the story well, took this opportunity to say:

"Oh, I'd forgotten. That was the year your Little Kou-tzu died, wasn't it?"

"Han killed him!" She let herself go: "That old bastard! Someone should put a bullet through his head!"

Seeing that she had switched her fury from her husband to her real enemy, Big Li reminded her of Han's many crimes, then ex-

plained that the Peasants' Association would help the villagers to rise up and overthrow Han. "They'll also avenge the death of your Little Kou-tzu," he concluded.

"That I do understand," she answered, "but why must he be always going out in the night?"

"During the day everybody is busy in the fields, and Old Pai has his own farming to do. The evening's the only time he has to go out."

She hung her head. Now, instead of being angry, she was feeling a bit ashamed of herself. Just a little gossip from Long-neck Han and she had gone and made a scene! She had not been fair to her husband or to his friend.

"Who was it talked to you? And what did he say Old Pai had been up to?"

She told the whole story, and he said:

"How could you believe a man like that?"

"Isn't he a poor man like us?" she fenced, although she realized she had been deceived.

"Aren't you a native here? Don't you realize yet what a dirty scoundrel he is?"

"I thought a poor man had a poor man's backbone."

"But he isn't a man, and he doesn't talk like a man. You can trust Pai. He's devoted to the people. You should help him instead of pulling him down."

"Of course, you're right. It's all that Long-neck's fault! Does he still have a headache?"

"He? Who? You mean Old Pai? Well, if you stop nagging him, he'll lose his headache at once." Laughing, Big Li hoisted himself up. "I'm going to bring him back to you."

"Just a minute, please. Will you take this jacket to him."

After the big man left, Mrs. Pai quickly looked at herself in the mirror and did her hair. Then she borrowed a dozen eggs from a neighbour. When Pai came back, neither of them mentioned the quarrel, but she poached two eggs for him. Pai spent a day mowing, and only came home at dusk. After supper, he went out again to see the land reform workers. His wife asked him to take with him a basketful of tender beans, cucumbers and fresh eggs for Team Leader Hsiao, who, however, refused them, acting upon the regulations of the work team.

That night Pai came home a little earlier than usual, when the crescent moon was peering in at the window. He felt too warm and stripped off his jacket. He lay down on the *kang* and, his big bared chest heaving, referred to their quarrel of the previous night.

"How jealous you were! You didn't even trouble to 'investigate and analyse' before taking action." Pai was now full of current phrases which he had lately picked up from the land reform workers.

XII

IN early autumn the wheat was ripening, dotting the far-stretching green fields with yellowish patches. In the pool on the east side of the village, the small yellow flowers of the water chestnut, lurking amid green reeds, looked from the distance like a sheet of gold. The southern hills beyond appeared like clouds of vapour hanging above the blue horizon. Swallows were catching insects, twittering and circling in the air. Some perched under the eaves and began preening their feathers. Lately there had been plenty of rain, and the vegetable patches needed no more watering. The sky had not cleared up completely yet, a few black or white clouds were still floating there. At noon, under the fiery rays of the sun, horses were snuffing from the heat, and dogs lolling their tongues. At night, the wind swept over the kaoliang and maize stalks and set the leaves shivering and rustling. The clouds gathered and blackened the sky and in another moment broke into a downpour, accompanied by thunder and lightning. The intermittent rain during the days past had turned the road into so many sloppy puddles and muddy pools, and the pedestrians, all barefoot, skirted the edge of the road.

Another struggle with Han was in the offing, a second mass meeting was to be called soon. Chao, Kuo, Pai, and Big Li were working day and night, mobilizing poor men for the struggle. The membership of the Peasants' Association had increased from about thirty people to over sixty. Liu Teh-shan also went out on rainy days to contact poor villagers, and never missed an opportunity to report his results to Team Leader Hsiao. Big Li did not think much of this man, who was evidently hawking his merits rather than putting his heart into the work. One day, on his way home from

another visit to the work team, Liu ran into Long-neck Han. Since it was too late to avoid him, Liu greeted him with a smile. The lackey of the landlord asked him sneeringly:

"I hear you're an official now. What's the rank?"

"Oh, you know circumstances forced me to it. I couldn't get out of it." Liu gave an embarrassed smile.

"They say another mass meeting will take place soon. Who's the target this time?" demanded Long-neck.

"I've no idea. I'm in charge of production matters only." Liu hated the Han family too, but dared not offend them openly. Neither would he help Long-neck with information. He knew quite well the struggle was against Han, but he would not say so, and after mumbling a few words made off.

Team Leader Hsiao had had several intimate talks with Old Tien, who had told him how Han had seized his three rooms. Hsiao had tried to encourage Tien to struggle against the landlord.

"I fear he's unbeatable," answered the simple, honest old man.

"If you don't retreat, we'll all see you through," Chao told him.

"All right," the old man had agreed, half-heartedly.

The land reform workers and the activists met to discuss in private the coming mass meeting, and decided to make the case of Old Tien's daughter the chief indictment against Han. They agreed to arrest Han before the trial, and they did. This time he was not put in the school, but in a small shack, the window of which was sealed with a wire net. The work team assigned two guards with rifles, and Pai posted two men from the Peasants' Association with spears, who stood watch in turn.

The next day, after breakfast, the different groups of the Peasants' Association went out to call villagers to the mass meeting at the school. Chao stood at the entrance to the schoolhouse, shouldering a rifle, barring the way to Han's relatives and supporters. Pai walked about on the alert, holding a spear in his right hand. Kuo brought out a large table from the classroom and placed it in the middle of the playground. Seeing the table, Old Sun commented: "This is the 'people's tribunal!'"

The villagers straggled in in threes and fours. They formed a semi-circle before the table, some speaking in low voices, some looking continually towards the entrance. On a pillar and a wall of the school were posted slogans: "Down with Han Feng-chi," "Poor

Men, Arise!" "Landlords Owe Us Blood Debts," "Share Out Land and Houses and Claim Back Rents," "Settle Accounts with the Local Despot and Landlord—Han Feng-chi."

As the militiamen walked Han onto the playground, Liu Sheng shouted the slogans and all the peasants shouted with him. By the time Han was standing beside the "people's tribunal," murmured comments ran through the crowd.

"This time, he'll be put in gaol."

"Look! His hands are tied."

"Is he going to die—or live? What do you say?"

"That depends on what his crimes are."

Some people were not particularly enthusiastic about the struggle, not because they were Han's relatives or sworn brothers, but because they owned land themselves and had had dealings with the Japanese. They were afraid that after Han had been dealt with it would be their turn. Others thought that Han's son, who was with the Kuomintang army, might one day stage a comeback and take reprisals. Still others thought Han deserved a trial, but did not intend to speak against him themselves. After all, exposed rafters are the first to rot. They decided to wait and see which way the wind blew. These three kinds of people kept silent.

Some of Han's agents were there, imagining people didn't know who they were. They acted like the keenest of the keen, shouting louder than anyone else.

Kuo presided over the meeting. Little Wang and Liu Sheng were standing by the table. Team Leader Hsiao, as usual, watched the proceedings from a distance, walking up and down where the crowd was thinnest.

Han stood beside the table, hanging his head. He was paler than last time. A number of children had swarmed round him to look curiously at the rope round his waist. One of the bolder children asked him to his face, "Mr. Han, why haven't you brought your big stick today?"

Stepping in front of the table, Kuo did not know what to do with his hands—he put them on his hips, let them hang limp at his sides, then folded his arms. With a flushed face, he looked at the gathering of about one thousand men before him and saw nothing but a black sea of faces! Some were jeering at him, he thought.

Now his wits had left him and, with them, his speech, which he had spent the whole morning preparing. Finally he said:

"Neighbours, we'll start our meeting." That was the first sentence of his speech, but he ended there, clean forgetting the rest of it. The villagers were holding their breath and waiting for him to go on. He simply had to improvise:

"You know me well—I've been a farmhand since I was a child. I can tend pigs and horses and till the soil, but I can't make a speech. I'm only good as a labourer. But our Peasants' Association is democratic; we can all speak out. Today we're fighting Han. He's our common enemy. We must speak out so that all wrongs be righted and all accounts settled. No need to be afraid. That's all."

Han raised his head. He could not see the landlords Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang, or any of his friends and relatives, and he felt more panic-stricken than before. Long-neck Han and Li Chen-chiang were there, but they dared not move or speak. The landlord decided to be meek, ready to agree to all their demands they might make. He must save his skin. So he stepped up to the table and addressed Kuo meekly:

"Chairman Kuo, may I say a few words first?"

"Don't let him speak!" interposed an angry voice from the crowd—Big Li.

"There's no harm letting him speak," said someone else.

"The Eighth Route Army is strong on democracy. How can you stop a fellow speaking?" The man who said this ducked behind the crowd as soon as he had spoken.

Kuo ruled: "All right, you speak." It was his first experience presiding at a meeting.

"I'm a bad egg," started Han, "a man with a feudal mentality. My mother died when I was a little boy. My father remarried and my stepmother beat me every other day. . . ."

"Stop this nonsense!" someone cursed.

"Don't let him drivel."

"As I was saying," Han went on. Kuo stepped forward to stop him, but in vain. The chairman was not sure whether he had the right to beat him.

"As I was saying, my stepmother made it impossible for me to live in peace at home. So I ran away, and unfortunately fell among

bad company. At eleven I went in for gambling. At sixteen I picked up women in the street."

"How many women have you slept with?" asked White Goatee who had saved Han twice before.

"More than a dozen," answered the landlord with a snigger.

Again, this had the effect of changing the tenor of the struggle. Somebody said: "He's owned up to all his faults, he's sure to reform." Somebody else echoed: "He's all right except for his land holdings. And now he's given them up." There was a movement towards the door, and though no one had left yet, there was a relaxed feeling. Furious, Kuo hastily pointed an accusing finger at Han's nose, and, with a flushed face, shouted at him:

"Don't let us hear any more such nonsense! Now tell us about your dirty work as chief of the interim Kuomintang village administration. And you kept private armed guards, didn't you?"

"That's true," admitted Han. He was all smiles, concealing his hatred for his former farmhand. "But then I was acting in the interest of the village, to maintain public order."

"Didn't you collect money from the villagers for the purchase of twenty-six rifles? What for?"

Han smiled again complacently.

"For the purpose of protecting the village."

Kuo raised his voice, his face crimsoning with fury:

"But you only kept the armed guards in your gun towers. When the bandits arrived, you treated them to a meal in your house and supplied their horses with fodder. Do you call that protecting the village?"

"Chairman Kuo, that isn't true. I hope you'll investigate the matter and do me justice." While putting on a bold face, Han was feeling nervous.

At this moment, there was a stir in the crowd. Big Li rolled up his sleeves and, with his brawny arms, pushed his way up to the front, with a hoary old man behind him. He announced:

"Old Tien wants to speak."

Standing by the "people's tribunal," Old Tien took off his tattered straw-hat and looked with hatred and fear at his oppressor. He was trembling with rage, and sweat was breaking out on his wrinkled sunburned forehead.

"Comrades, I want to say something—I want to have my wrong redressed." He looked at Liu Sheng, Little Wang and Kuo, and said:

"I hope you comrades will see that justice is done me."

"State your case to the whole community. They'll decide what's right," Little Wang answered.

Old Tien turned round to look at the crowd, then addressed Han:

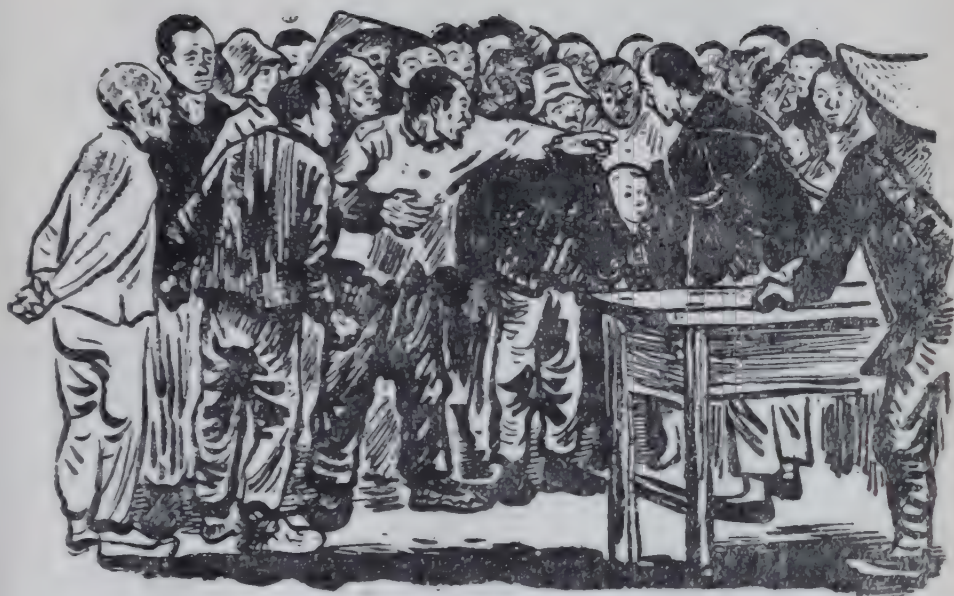
"In 1939, I came to this village and worked fifty *mou* of land as your tenant. I, my wife and my daughter, we three had only one and a half rooms to live in, dilapidated and leaky rooms. On rainy days they were just a pool. At times you would say to me: 'I'm short of rooms, you had better move out.' I said: 'Mr. Han, where could I find a place outside?' You lost your temper and said: 'Go wherever you like. What the hell has that got to do with me?' I said: 'Mr. Han, I would like to rig up a little place of my own, but where could I find the ground?' You suddenly became a kind man and said: 'Ground is no matter. There's some space by the stable where you can build if you like. I won't ask you for any rent. With two or three rooms, your family will feel quite settled.' I went back and told my wife: 'Thank heaven, we've such a good landlord.' That winter I hauled logs from the hills, and went back and forth with an old ox and old cart. It was a bitter winter with a heavy snowfall, so cold that my nose and head ached and my feet felt like ice. One day, when I was going downhill with a cartload of pine logs, the ox slipped over a stone, and, with a crash, ox and cart toppled down into a gully. The wind was howling terribly. What a time I had trying to pull them out! I finally managed it though, with ten or so carters who stopped to give me a hand. The old ox had one horn broken."

Somebody flung in:

"Old Tien, make your story short."

"Who's that?" Kuo snapped. "Old Tien, never mind. You just carry on."

"Your elder brother, who was then in charge of a timber company, commandeered all my logs and sent them over to the Japanese military for firewood—those logs I had sweated so hard all winter to get! My old woman cried all night. The next winter I went again to the hills and hauled down cartloads of logs, and I also laid in dried reeds, earth and nails. The third winter I slowly built up three rooms—all complete except for a *kang* and two window frames. We three moved into the east room, but the next day you put three horses



Old Tien turned round to look at the crowd, then
addressed Han. . . .

and an ass in our west room. You said: 'The animals are sick—the open stable is no good for them. Let them stay here for a time.'

"It had taken me three winters to build the place, and you must have it for your horses. My wife went down on her knees with tears in her eyes, and kowtowed to you and your son to have mercy on us and not make a stable of our new rooms. Once the animals were in, how could we live there? But your son only kicked and cursed her: 'You bitch! You forget whose land it is. Go on crying, and I'll throw you out of here!'"

Old Tien paused for breath and wiped his tears with his gnarled and withered hands.

"Three years to build a home, and you turned it into a stable. Your beasts with their droppings made such a stench, all the air in the house was foul and drew flies and mosquitoes. In the night the mosquitoes droned and attacked us till we were swollen all over from their bites. I resigned myself to fate and didn't complain, but you didn't stop there. One day, you came to look at that brown mare of yours, and when you saw our girl you talked a lot of nonsense. She was only sixteen and you were forty-three. You asked her to marry you and she refused. You dragged her off to the haystack and tore off her clothes, and when she bit you, you flew into a rage. You walked off, saying: 'Just wait!' Presently you came back with three men and declared you were going to tear down the house to take back the land, unless we gave you the girl instead. You and your men went in and dragged her away. . . ."

Old Tien started crying bitterly, and some of the villagers shouted: "Down with the wicked landlord!" "Down with the local despot Han!" The audience surged forward. Old Tien continued:

"The four of you dragged her to the backyard and tied her to the tobacco rack with a straw rope. When she screamed, you rammed a handkerchief into her mouth. Then you yanked off her clothes and whipped her naked body with a willow switch. Her blood was coursing down her body, and then. . . and then. . . ." Old Tien could not go on—he cried aloud. The crowd surged nearer. People shouted: "Beat him! Beat him!" A brick came flying up from somewhere and landed quite close to Han. His face turned pale, and he stood there trembling, knee knocking against knee.

"Strip him first!" shouted somebody.

"Kill him!" added somebody else.

A man came up and slapped Han across the face. Blood gushed from his nose.

"Good! A good blow! Give him another!" shouted somebody else.

However, the sight of blood melted the hearts of many, especially women, and silence fell. Who had dealt the blow? Han looked up, saw it was Li Chen-chiang, and understood. He bent his head lower to let the blood flow in big drops so that everybody could see. Most of the peasants were nonplussed at first to see Li Chen-chiang beating Han; later they understood, but didn't know what to do. Old Tien had stepped back a little in surprise, but Kuo urged him:

"Go on, Old Tien."

"I've nothing more to say," he answered. The honest but timid old fellow was bewildered, and withdrew behind the table. Li Chen-chiang took his place in front, and White Goatee edged up in support. Pointing a finger at Han, Li trumpeted:

"Old Tien has been settling accounts with you. Being your tenant too, I want to accuse you likewise. I gave you a slap just now. Did you deserve it or not?"

"I deserved it," Han answered. Some admired Li Chen-chiang for his courage. Some let out a few more curses. But the majority, including Old Tien, kept silent, and gradually stepped aside. Li Chen-chiang continued:

"That year, when you were village head, the Japanese military wanted a supply of broken bowls, and you went round collecting them. I had no broken bowls in my house, but you insisted that I should pick some from the garbage piles. You said if I didn't do so, you would impose a fine on me. Do you admit it?"

"Yes, Brother Li," Han answered. He looked better, and was waxing more fluent too. "I'm a big bad egg. I've done lots of bad things because of this bad puppet-style brain of mine. It made me like to bully people. Now we've a democratic government, and the policy is lenient, I beg you to pardon me and save my unworthy life. I'll make amends, work for the Peasants' Association, obey Team Leader Hsiao and all committee members and walk with them on the revolutionary road. If I fail to do so, you can shoot me."

"Don't wander so far from the point," said Li Chen-chiang. "Just tell us what you're going to do to pay for all the bad things

you've done. Do you choose to be beaten, to be fined, to give up your property, or to sit behind the bars? What do you want?"

"Is the choice mine?" asked Han, and tried his best to hide a grin of satisfaction. "I'll do what people say I should. Anyway, I've been tried three times. I admit my mistakes and I'll accept punishment."

"Fine him one hundred thousand dollars," White Goatee proposed.

"Divide his remaining two hundred *mou* of land," Li Chen-chiang added.

The villagers started talking at once. Some suggested that he should be thrown out of his house. Some wanted him to be put in prison. Some said that he should be set free after he had paid the fine and given up his land. Others had different ideas, and still others, completely dumb; strayed off, looking for a chance to quit. Liu Teh-shan took the lead and went as far as the exit, and when Chao questioned him he said: "Last night a relation came to see me and I had a bit too much to drink with him. Now my head's aching. I must go home to rest." Some more villagers followed him out, mostly on the pretext that they didn't feel well, though some said they had work to do.

Old Sun remained behind, but he didn't say anything, just squatted in a corner at the back. He rose to his feet when Team Leader Hsiao came up and asked him:

"Why didn't you speak up?"

"They took all the words out of my mouth," answered the carter.

"What do you think made Li Chen-chiang hit Han?"

Old Sun smiled knowingly and answered:

"Well, a criminal landlord must be beaten."

"Was he really beating him?"

"Hard to say. The two of them are hand in glove, and they've both read the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.¹ I should say that box on the ear was skilfully given by a Chou Yu and gladly taken by a Huang Kai."

Team Leader Hsiao stepped forward and spoke first to the land reform workers and then to Kuo, Pai and Chao. After some discussion, Kuo stepped back to the table and announced:

¹ A fourteenth-century novel based on events which took place in the third century A.D. Chou Yu of the Kingdom of Wu had Huang Kai, another Wu general, cruelly beaten, and then sent him to the enemy camp in order to deceive the enemy.

"We shall break up now. It's a fine day, and you people probably have work in the fields. Before you leave, you may suggest what we should do with Han."

"Keep him in custody," answered many voices in chorus.

"Let him pay the hundred thousand dollars' fine, and have someone guarantee him. Nothing less will do," somebody added.

"Do the majority agree?" asked Kuo.

"That's right. Let him pay and go home," many concurred. As a matter of fact, they were eager to go home now themselves.

Kuo turned to Old Tien and asked him:

"Old Tien, what do you say?"

Old Tien hung his head and was silent for a time, then he said:

"I've nothing to say. I agree."

XIII

AFTER the mass meeting broke up, Han was taken back into custody. By noon, Han's bodyguard Li Ching-shan had brought in the one hundred thousand dollars' fine, and the guarantee sent by Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang. Then Han was released.

Back in their homes, even the enthusiasts among the villagers felt disappointed. They had gone to the mass meeting full of doubts, and come home full of new doubts. Some went down to the fields, some walked horses out, some harnessed horses to carts, some chopped hay, some weeded vegetable patches, some went fishing. Some sulked or lost their temper over trifles, others smashed bowls, whipped their horses, and quarrelled with their wives. Still others just lay on the *kang*, silent and moody, to while away the time. The even tenor of their life had been disturbed, but things seemed to be settling down again. The villagers felt themselves back in the old rut.

Old Sun had not gone home. In the morning, he had told his wife that in this meeting they were going to deal once for all with the traitor. The way things had turned out, he did not want to go home and face his wife. He decided to go and see the work team instead. When he arrived, the work team was holding a meeting to sum up the experience of their work. Nevertheless, he went up to Team Leader Hsiao and declared:

"Team Leader Hsiao, I don't want to be an activist any longer. This little official post is too much for me—it brings me only misery."

"An activist isn't an official," Team Leader Hsiao told him. "He's just a common citizen who dares to take part in a good cause and lead a group of people. If you don't care to carry on—don't care to be an activist—you may just chuck it, you needn't resign."

"It isn't that I don't want to come any more. You know I've been with you since you came here. I've put my hand to the plough and don't want to turn back. Only I feel bad when we lose every time we fight."

Team Leader Hsiao tried to comfort him and told him to talk it over with his friends, saying that it was impossible to eradicate overnight the power of the landlords which had existed for thousands of years. It wouldn't do to be impatient.

Liu Sheng was not happy either, but he said nothing. He sat reading a novel at the table near the window.

Little Wang thought that Han should have been shot long ago. He appealed to his leader:

"You ask Chao whether he doesn't agree with me that Han should be finished off."

"We can't just consider the wishes of a handful of activists. We must first work on the masses. The more people we can win over to our cause, the easier our work. We can't have too many comrades-in-arms. The proverb says: 'There's wisdom in a crowd.'"

Little Wang was not completely convinced, but he did not argue.

Team Leader Hsiao himself did not feel any better. It had distressed him to see the villagers going home in low spirits. He shared their disappointment, but he kept his disappointment to himself. He was a hard worker. Schooled by many years' experience, he knew that practical problems could only be solved by patient work, and did not want to waste time and energy in day-dreaming or idle talk. He also knew that people came to him for encouragement and solutions to their problems, not for his grumbles and sighs. After Old Sun left, Hsiao continued to preside over the meeting. He concluded:

"We're in for a sharpening of the struggle. We must work harder and be more cautious than ever. Section Leader Chang, you tell the guards to keep on the alert. Old Liu, you might lay aside your book for a moment and go and find out what new tricks Li

Chen-chiang and the others are up to. Little Wang, don't cry over spilt milk. You go and see Chao and the others. Wan and I will call to see Old Tien. He can't have told the whole story at the mass meeting. All right, that's all. Let's go."

Team Leader Hsiao set off to see Old Tien, followed by Wan.

Tien was chopping straw in the yard. Seeing Team Leader Hsiao, he hurried out to meet him at the gate. Shaking his hand he led him inside. The rooms still looked fairly new, but a stench of horse dung issued from the west room. Hsiao and Wan looked in at it. Since the arrival of the work team, Han had taken his horses away. The clay on the upper part of the wall, chafed by the horses, was peeling off, the straw showing through. The door-frame showed incisions where the horses had gnawed at it. The room was littered with dried dung and swarming with flies. It would be impossible to live in it, unless it was rebuilt. Old Tien led the visitors into the east room housing his family. On the *kang* was a blind woman of over fifty, white-haired, dressed in a patched and repatched blue gown. She was fumblingly twisting hemp threads.

"Team Leader Hsiao has come to visit us," Old Tien told her.

"Oh! Team Leader Hsiao!" she strained her lightless eyes in the direction of the voice as if she could see. Then, hurriedly wiping the edge of the *kang* clean with her sleeve, she said:

"Sit here, Comrade. We owe so much to you. As soon as you arrived, Han took his horses away from the other room."

She drew herself closer to the team leader and continued in a low voice: "Han is a demon, but now you've got him." She leaned over to the side and groped for the tobacco pouch. Old Tien lighted a stalk of hemp at the stove and gave it to Team Leader Hsiao to light his pipe. Hsiao began to talk, first of Han and then of the Tien's daughter. The old man quickly signed to him not to go on, but it was too late—the old woman was already whimpering.

"You spoke of my daughter—she was cruelly done to death, Comrade!" Her eyes were flooding with tears, and her withered, blue-veined hands were trembling.

Old Tien tried to stop her.

"There you go again—and with Team Leader Hsiao visiting us."

She sighed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "That girl of mine had an unhappy fate. If only you'd come earlier, Team Leader Hsiao!"

"Let's go for a walk, Team Leader Hsiao," put in Old Tien.
"Once she starts, she can't stop."

Out in the yard, the old man said with a deep sigh:

"She's cried herself blind. She's been crying for three years."

"Cried herself blind?" the team leader asked.

"Yes, women will keep harping back. Dead is dead. Only a girl." Absent-mindedly he put one foot into a puddle and his shoe was sucked off by the mud. He bent down to retrieve it, then continued, talking in a whisper as if afraid of being overheard. "But then I don't blame her for the way she mopes. A little boy had died before, so she set great store by the girl."

"How did your daughter die?"

"Let's go out to the north of the village," he suggested instead of answering the question.

In a short while, they were outside the village wall, and Wan cocked his gun.

"Don't worry, there are no bandits round here now—they've gone to Taching Mountain. Would you like to see my daughter's grave? It's just outside the North Gate."

The setting sun was casting its rays aslant on the river, making the ripples sparkle. On both sides of the river grew green reeds. Water chestnuts had flowered. Swallows were skimming over the water. Water wagtails flew up from the river banks to soar in the sky, finally alighting on the river banks again. North of the river stretched a large expanse of fields where ripe maize showed waving reddish tassels. Huge golden sunflowers had all grown facing the east. The south side of the river was overgrown with weeds. A small mound here, overgrown with grass, was Old Tien's daughter's grave.

They sat down among the weeds, and Old Tien went on with the story of his daughter. Han, he said, had tied her to a tobacco rack, yanked off her clothes, and whipped her until her skin was in shreds. Han had tried to make her confess that the man to whom she was engaged was in league with the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies. She never let out a word.

"Was he really in touch with the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

Old Tien looked round and answered in a whisper:

"He was, and she knew it, but she would rather die than give him away."

"What's his name? Don't be afraid to tell me. Our United Democratic Army is the same as the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies."

"His name is Chang Tien-yuan. My daughter would rather die than give him away. They beat her till midnight, before they let her go. She vomited blood, and within a fortnight she died from her wounds."

"Where is Chang Tien-yuan now?"

"That very night my girl told me to tell him to run away. He went south of the Great Wall. I've never heard from him since."

They stood up, and, standing silent for a while before the grave overgrown with grass, Team Leader Hsiao looked at it with respect. As they walked off, he said to the old man:

"She was a good girl. You must avenge her. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Tien answered. They went back through the North Gate. As Hsiao headed for the schoolhouse, he saw wisps of smoke curling up from every kitchen, where the villagers were preparing their supper. When he got back, he found Little Wang, Chao and others waiting for him.

Little Wang had called on Chao earlier in the afternoon. There he had found Pai, Kuo, Big Li and Little Yang. Chao was smoking while the others were discussing the result of the mass meeting. When the young land reform worker came in, they all rose to greet him and asked him to sit on the *kang*.

"Go ahead with your discussion. I'll sit here," he answered as he sat down on the edge of the *kang*.

"Han had his men at the mass meeting," said Kuo.

"Who?" asked Big Li.

"Don't you know?"

"Do you mean Li Chen-chiang?"

"Yes, that punch of his saved Han's life."

"And there was that man with the white beard again. Who's he?"

"He's one of Han's sworn brothers. He lives at the north end, his name is Hu."

"Comrade Wang, how do you think we should tackle Han?"

Big Li asked, knitting his brows. "People still don't see eye to eye."

"Suppose we go to the schoolhouse and have a meeting?" Little Wang suggested. They all agreed.

They talked things over with Hsiao till midnight, and decided upon three things. One, the Peasants' Association was to admit more poor men as members and to hold more secret meetings to discuss how to fight Han. Two, all members were responsible for watching what the rogues were up to. Three, a militia was to be organized. Big Li was made chief of the anti-traitor committee, Pai remained captain of the militia. Liu Teh-shan was removed from the production committee, but the office was left vacant for the time being, since it was still too early to organize production.

"As captain of the militia," said Pai, "I'm responsible for its organization. There's no lack of men, but where can we find weapons?"

"We can lend you one rifle," said Hsiao. "The rest you must find yourselves."

Chao Yu-lin suggested that Big Li should buy iron and make spearheads. As for the money, the fine from Han could be appropriated. Big Li answered: "I could start that this very night." When they broke up, the full moon was hanging above the elms. By its pale light, they went home. In the small hours that morning Big Li started forging spearheads, and the clang of his hammer could be heard till cock-crow.

Discussion groups were formed. During the day, in the shade under the trees, in the fields, on the vegetable patches, on the river banks, small groups of peasants could be found chatting in low voices. After dusk, if you looked through the windows of many small thatched huts, you could see small groups chatting. At the sight of any stranger approaching, they stopped short. These were semi-secret meetings of poor men led by activists. In these small meetings, which fitted in with the peasants' way of life, poor men poured out their grievances, argued, agreed, and drew closer together, as they prepared themselves for the struggle against Han.

Every day, the activists sent in reports, and Team Leader Hsiao studied them and drew conclusions, which he passed on to all the groups.

In the meantime, Han knew nothing of what was going on in these small groups.

Liu Sheng had been sent by Hsiao to see Li Chen-chiang. He walked into the courtyard of Han's meeting-hall and, looking through the window into the lighted room, saw Long-neck Han, Li Chen-chiang and White Goatee laying their heads together. When they saw him they rose hastily and greeted him with smiles. He talked a while with them, then hurried back to report to Team Leader Hsiao. They all discussed the matter, and Big Li said:

"When Han was interim head of the village, he set up the Kuomintang party branch in his big hall. Before that, the hall was the meeting place of a special service organization of the puppet Manchukuo. Long-neck and Li Chen-chiang were in and out all the time."

"What about White Goatee?"

"He didn't go very often. But he belonged to the gang. When Han held a meeting of the gang, he went."

"We must keep an eye on them," said Hsiao.

Big Li sent people to watch the three men. White Goatee, Long-neck Han and Li Chen-chiang found it difficult to carry on, and Han felt as if he had suddenly lost his arms, ears, and eyes! The ground seemed to be yawning beneath his feet! The watch-towers of his house seemed to be crumbling down! Never before had he been so worried. Unable to sleep at night, he kept smoking and pacing the courtyard, sometimes till dawn.

XIV

By the end of August the last mowing was over and the peasants hung up their hoes. The rainy season had set in. Most people stayed indoors doing odd jobs—replastering walls, chopping straw, mending grain crates in preparation for the harvest. They could have given part of their spare time to organize the struggle against Han, but they slackened their efforts and even ceased to meet and chat regularly. The uncertain political situation and the rumour-mongering of the reactionary elements seemed to have affected their attitude.

Meanwhile, the work team had received instructions from the

county Party committee to persist in their work in spite of difficulties and to effect the distribution of land with the least delay. They were working day and night. Team Leader Hsiao was in the best of spirits though he looked sallow and lean through overwork, and had the beginnings of a beard. He said at a meeting:

"All right then, it's time we started confiscating the land, houses, and draught animals of landlords like Han, Tu and Tang for distribution to poverty-stricken peasants. The more we give the poor, the better. And the quicker the better."

"What about the crops that haven't been harvested?" asked Liu Sheng.

"The crop goes with the land—whoever gets the land gets the crop," Team Leader Hsiao answered.

A land-distribution committee was organized. According to the total amount of land and the population in the village, each villager was entitled to five *mou*. Distant plots were given to those who owned horses, while those who had no horses were given land lying nearer. The committee divided into five sections which between them covered the whole village.

The section under Kuo was the most conscientious. Everybody in his section had to mark the boundary of the land given him with stakes, although at first people did not like the trouble.

"What should we mark the boundary for? We all belong to one village. Everybody surely knows everybody else's land without any sign," objected an elderly man who was not particularly interested in land distribution.

"Better mark out the boundary with stakes, otherwise there may be trouble when it comes to dividing the crops," Kuo persisted. He and his men worked a good five days, staking out the plots, grading them according to the soil and dividing the yet unripe crops. A farmhand, Old Chu, dared not accept the land. Kuo laid aside all his other work to talk to him one whole evening, and finally Chu said:

"To tell the truth, I would like to have the land. Land is life—who doesn't want it? But—but I'm afraid. . . ."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I've never told a lie in my life. Frankly, I'm afraid the work team won't be here long, and the Kuomintang army will come back and cut off our heads."

"Don't you worry, the work team won't leave us. If they do, you can hold me responsible," Kuo answered confidently.

"Come to you? Aren't you afraid of losing your own head?" Old Chu rejoined with a smile.

"Yes, come to me," Kuo insisted. "I'll find other poor villagers to help. Helping each other, standing firmly together, our Peasants' Association will be as strong as an iron barrel. What, then, need we be afraid of? Chairman Chao says: 'Poor men stick to poor men and together overthrow a kingdom.' Yes, we're stronger than the Kuomintang army—you think they dare come again? Come one, catch one—come two, catch a brace. Team Leader Hsiao says this is just how the Eighth Route Army on the other side of the Great Wall defeated the Japanese invaders."

Kuo realized that Chu was only half convinced and, knowing what was worrying him, he said: "The Eighth Route Army is stronger than ever."

"How strong?" Chu asked eagerly.

"Team Leader Hsiao says: 'Chairman Mao Tse-tung has placed more than two million men inside and outside the Great Wall.'"

When Chu heard this, he said: "I believe you, and I want the land. I've six mouths to feed. You give me thirty *mou* of good land."

"You shall have it, but there's scarcely any good land left." However, Kuo none the less settled on him a tract close by his house. Later, in summing up the experience in connection with the land distribution, Team Leader Hsiao said: "Kuo combines work with persuasion. That explains his success."

The section under Little Yang worked in a different style. About thirty men gathered in his room behind the flapjack shop, each bringing with him boundary stakes. Then Little Yang announced: "The work team is giving us five *mou* of land per head. What kind of land do you want? Speak up."

Nobody said anything.

"Why don't you speak up? Who's run away with your tongues?" demanded Yang angrily, making a wry mouth.

After a long while, an old man muttered:

"The work team is giving us land, free of charge. How can we pick and choose? We'll take what we're given."

"What if you agree to what's given and then criticize me behind my back?" Yang asked.

"I promise you nobody will criticize you behind your back. And there's no need to look at the land or mark off the boundaries."

"You decide everything for us, Little Yang, and save us the trouble."

"All right, then, as you trust me, I'll manage everything for you. Those who have horses will be given land a little farther away."

"Whatever you say goes."

"The crop goes with the land. There mustn't be any squabble over it."

"We all belong to one village—why should we squabble?"

"That's settled then. The meeting is adjourned. If you go back now, there's still time to do some work."

"Right, Yang understands us."

The thirty-odd men dispersed, leaving behind their thirty-odd wooden stakes to be used as fuel in the flapjack shop.

That night, Little Yang got the proprietor of the flapjack shop Chang Fu-ying to help him draw up a list of men and pieces of land. By the light of a kerosene lamp, the flapjack man scrawled till midnight. The next morning, Little Yang strode into the school-house, handed the list to Team Leader Hsiao and declared:

"The work is done. Who gets what—it's all written there."

"Quick work!" Team Leader Hsiao looked at Little Yang's head with the hair parted in the middle, then he started studying the list, but, as he did so, he knitted his brows.

"This doesn't read like land distribution; it looks more like an account. Did you write this list yourself?"

"We co-operated, Chang Fu-ying and I."

"Can you read and write?"

"Not very well."

Team Leader Hsiao picked out one item which read:

"Chang Ching-hsiang, three mouths to feed, no land, no horse—gets fifteen *mou* of flat land south of the village, originally belonging to Han."

"Go and fetch Chang Ching-hsiang here," said Hsiao.

"All right," Little Yang went off, thinking: "I'm finished this

time." But he had to do as he was told. When he saw Chang, he said:

"When you see Team Leader Hsiao, mind you thank him properly for giving you land. Don't say anything about the stakes."

"Don't worry, Brother Yang. I'll just thank them," the young man promised. He trusted Yang because he was an old neighbour and a member of the land-distribution committee. When he saw Team Leader Hsiao, he said:

"Thank you very much for giving me land. My father and my father's fathers never had any land of their own. Now I've fifteen *mou*!"

"Is it good land?"

"Couldn't be better. It's flat and lies hard by the village. In the past no peasant without a horse could ever hope even to rent, let alone own it."

"Where is it? How far from your house?"

"Oh, within a stone's throw. Not far at all."

"Tell me exactly where. Whose land was it originally?" Hsiao pressed him.

"It's on the bank of the river outside the North Gate. It belonged to the landlord Tu."

Suppressing a laugh, the team leader pulled out from his pocket Little Yang's list, and read aloud:

"Chang—gets fifteen *mou* of land south of the village, originally belonging to Han."

The whole room exploded with laughter, and the peasant looked flabbergasted. But when he saw the team leader was laughing too, and hadn't blamed him, he hastily owned up:

"It's not my fault. Yang told me: 'Mind you thank Team Leader Hsiao properly for giving you land, and don't say anything about the stakes.'" He turned around and called: "Brother Yang! Brother Yang!"

"He's gone," said Wan.

"Yang's taking care to keep out of trouble, and leaving me in the lurch. Well, all right, Team Leader Hsiao, you may punish me as you please, and I'll take it."

"You aren't to blame for this. You may go home. Only the land for your section will have to be divided all over again. Old Wan, tell Chairman Chao from me that he'd better see to this section

himself." He laid aside the list, and asked a white-haired old man who had just come in:

"What can I do for you?"

"They say that the work team is leaving. So I came to see you off," the old man said.

"Who told you so?"

"Everybody says so."

"You go and tell them our work team isn't leaving. Nor is the Eighth Route Army. We won't leave this village until we've done away with the reactionary elements in it. We hope all the villagers will set their minds at rest." After the old man had gone, Chao came in and reported to Team Leader Hsiao:

"The land distribution done by Little Yang is false. He didn't get his men to stake off the boundaries. The Peasants' Association held a meeting to discuss the matter and decided to remove him from his post. But he wept and said that he realized his mistake and wanted to correct it. Now what should we do with him?"

"What did the majority at the meeting say?" the team leader asked.

"They said: 'Little Yang was originally a peasant. Let him off this time and give him a chance to correct his mistake.'"

"Very well, then give him a chance. But you must always help him along. What about you, did you take your share of land?" the team leader asked.

"Me? Well, if I had refused, how could I have persuaded others to take their shares?"

"Then you aren't afraid of the Kuomintang army coming to chop off your head?"

"It's a question of who'll chop whose head?" Chao answered, bringing his rifle down on the floor with a thump. "With this, we'll let the Kuomintang troops and their American masters come, but won't let them get back alive."

"Have you anything else to do today?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

"No, nothing more."

"Then let's go for a walk," he suggested. "Old Wan, you stay here."

They strolled along the roadside in the shade of the elms, through whose thick foliage the sun's rays were falling like golden

discs to the ground. The south wind was wafting the scent of ripening wheat and grass. Early autumn in Northeast China is the best time of the year—neither too hot nor too cold. The countryside is still green in spots, and the countryfolk not too busy. Chao, his rifle slung across his shoulder, was walking alongside his leader. Presently he left the road to plunge into some bushes and soon emerged with a cluster of small red fruit in his hand. Putting one into his mouth, he said:

“Crab apples are at their best at harvest time.”

Team Leader Hsiao tasted one and found it rather sour. They walked on, chatting. Chao said:

“Black currants are even more sour. In the puppet Manchukuo time, you had to pay a tax in kind even for them.”

A flock of grey and white geese in the ditch craned their necks at the men's approach, and waddled, cackling, up and down, but without scattering in fright. One gander was trying vainly to shake off a green willow leaf sticking to its red bill. A man who was watering a horse by the well called to Chao:

“Nice weather for a stroll, isn't it, Chairman Chao?” He was turning the handle of the pulley. Nodding and smiling, Chao answered:

“Yes.”

They walked on. Sparrows were rocking slightly on the tender twigs of the willows, and behind the poplars were curling up grey smoke wisps from the kitchens where the villagers were preparing their midday meal. Cocks were crowing here and there. Creaking down the road towards them was a three-horse cart piled high with sheaves of hay and weeds, on top of which were several bulging sacks.

“Have some corn.” The young peasant in a straw-hat drew in rein, and hailed them, then pulled out a dozen ears of corn from one of the sacks and tossed them to Chao. A colt, who had been following behind the cart, took advantage of this halt to hurry forward to suck from its dam.

They walked on. On either side of the road were bright yellow sunflowers towering above the green pea plants on the trellises. They walked into a vegetable garden and sat down on a stack of firewood. Chao rolled a cigarette. Here, for the first time, Team

Leader Hsiao proposed to him that he should join the Party. They had a long talk on the subject.

That night Chao did not sleep a wink. He felt so happy, now that he was to become a member of the Communist Party. He turned over and over on the *kang*, until his wife woke and said: "Why aren't you sleeping? What are you thinking about?"

He did not answer her. Before daybreak, while the sky was twinkling with stars and the earth was wet with dew, he was off to see Team Leader Hsiao, his rifle slung across his shoulder. He was given an application form to fill in. Chao Yu-lin, a poverty-stricken peasant, now became a probationary member of the Communist Party of China. He would be a full member after a three-month period of probation. As the one to introduce him, Hsiao put down his view of Chao on the form:

"A poor peasant, honest and able, willing to sacrifice everything for the cause of the workers' and peasants' liberation."

Later, Kuo, Big Li and Pai were also admitted to the Party as probationary members.

XV

THINGS were looking up. The United Democratic Army under the command of General Lin Piao, by following Chairman Mao Tse-tung's strategy, had dealt a crushing blow to Chiang Kai-shek's U.S.-equipped troops, making it impossible for them to raise their heads again in the Northeast. The news of the victory cheered the hearts of the peasantry, giving a fresh impetus to the mass movement.

The rumours had lost their attractiveness. The landlords and their lackeys had withdrawn into their shells. All they could do was to spy furtively on the peasants' activities, and try to choke them off by spreading rumours, pitting one man against another and sniping in the dark. Villagers called on the work team and the Peasants' Association at all hours of the day and night. The discussion groups were active again. Even Liu Teh-shan, who had shown the white feather and betaken himself to a shack on the hillside, showed up again in the village. Old Sun, as he drove the landlord Tu's big cart, would tell people: "I was the one who brought the land reform workers here in my cart!"

Little Yang was working much more keenly too. He had distributed the land and was now leading a discussion group. Team Leader Hsiao, Little Wang, and Liu Sheng went regularly to these small groups to give talks on current events. They cited examples to explain why the poor should rise up. They told stories about the life and achievements of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and the history of the Communist Party, the Eighth Route Army, and the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies. Liu Sheng taught them many new songs, and soon the villagers were singing about Chairman Mao and the Eighth Route Army. They learned songs too from the opera *The White-haired Girl*, and the song *Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*. The villagers said: "You've opened our eyes all right! It's as if you'd opened two windows in our minds—now everything's clear!"

Chao, Kuo, Big Li and Pai were as busy as ever. One moonlit night, on their way home after a meeting, Kuo and Big Li were passing the gateway of Han's house when they saw a flickering light in the courtyard. Curious, they stopped in their tracks and the next instant heard footsteps and voices.

"That swineherd is a source of trouble," said a voice, the landlord Han's.

"Yes, he must be put out of the way," answered another voice, Long-neck Han's.

"That's not so easy now," said the landlord. "You get hold of Yang and handle him tactfully." The two men conferred in whispers for a time, so that Kuo and Big Li could hear nothing. Finally, they heard Han say: "All right. If you can't come yourself, send your boy along!"

The wicket-door slammed, and the two activists quickly took cover behind the trees and slipped around the corner.

"Who is Han's swineherd?" asked Kuo. "Isn't it Wu Chia-fu?"

"Yes. Han raped his mother, then sold her to a brothel in Shuangcheng. Don't you remember that?" answered Big Li.

"Another blood debt Han will have to settle. I wonder why we haven't remembered the boy before. Why not get him to join our group?"

"Who's the Yang they were mentioning just now? Do they mean Little Yang?" Kuo asked.

Instead of going home, they went to the schoolhouse to report

to Team Leader Hsiao what they had just heard. Chao and Pai were there too. Team Leader Hsiao asked:

"What sort of man do you think Little Yang is?"

"He's a poor man," said Big Li. "Used to be a dealer in rags and bones. He has a weakness for petty gains."

"Is he on good terms with Han?" the team leader asked.

"No, I don't think so," Big Li answered.

"Han once gave him a beating," Kuo added.

"When the Japanese devils wanted flax," said Chao, "Han used to go round with his big stick collecting it for them. If he found anybody had gone to bed without having hatched the daily quantity of flax, he would give him a beating."

"Plenty of people felt his stick on their backs," said Pai.

"You must have felt it more than once, Old Pai," chuckled Kuo, remembering Pai's propensity for sleeping in the past.

"Oh yes, two or three times." Knowing that his friend was laughing at him for his former failing, Pai cut down the number of beatings he had received.

"Your wife once told me you'd had eight beatings at least," said Kuo.

"You shouldn't believe her," Pai fenced.

Meanwhile, Team Leader Hsiao had been thinking over Little Yang's case. Now he said:

"Little Yang is a peasant with low political consciousness. We should try to help him. Since he has been elected a member of the land-distribution committee, it's no good to remove him from his post too hastily. But I hope you comrades will have a good talk with him. We'll consider it later on." Then they dispersed.

Little Yang was as fond of small advantages as ever. He liked to act on his own authority instead of consulting Chao or Kuo, whom he looked down upon as illiterates, although he himself knew only a few characters.

"Who's he, that fellow Kuo? How much is he worth?" he would say.

Since he had been made a member of the land-distribution committee, the village rascals had started to make up to him, and often treated him to pancakes and dumplings. With his mouth greased, he was quite liberal in his promises to do everybody favours.

"Brother Yang, could you help me to straighten something out?"

"Sure! Just bring your problems to me. I can turn big problems into little ones, and little ones into no problems at all!"

"Brother Yang, I'm in a fix. Could you put in a word for me with the work team?"

"That's easy! Team Leader Hsiao always listens to me." As a matter of fact, he was afraid of the team leader and seldom dared to call on him.

One evening, when he went home from a meeting, the proprietor of the flapjack shop told him that Long-neck Han had sent his boy to ask him to his house. Little Yang knew Long-neck Han for what he was, but still he went, for politeness' sake. When he got there, Long-neck told him: "Mr. Han invites you to dinner this evening." Little Yang was in a quandary: To go would be against the regulations of the Peasants' Association, while not to go would look rude. He thought it better to accept the invitation.

When he heard his dogs barking, Han, wearing a lined gown, ran out with a beaming smile to greet his guest, and bowed him into the east wing of the mansion. The room was lit by a kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling. A mat had been spread over the *kang*, and the chest on it was piled high with folded cotton-padded quilts with red silk covers printed with big flower patterns and pink silk covers printed with small flower patterns. One blanket was brightly embroidered with a crane standing under a pine, a symbol of longevity; another, with a plum tree in bloom, a symbol of five blessings. On the other side of the room, opposite the *kang*, were an oblong red-lacquered trunk embossed with a golden phoenix design, a glass case, and a full-length mirror. Everything in the room had been polished till it shone.

The host asked the guest to sit on the *kang*, but the latter thought it too great an honour for him. Instead, he sat bolt upright on a red-lacquered stool. Han took a packet of cigarettes from the table on the *kang*, and offered one to Little Yang.

In the meetings Little Yang had joined with the others in condemning Han, and, on such occasions, had really almost hated him. Now all this was forgotten. It was enough for him that the once haughty landlord was today treating him as an equal. A bad man had become a good man, he thought. And instead of calling him Yang, Han addressed him respectfully.

"Chairman Yang, we've roebuck venison for dinner today!"

"Oh, please don't call me chairman. I'm not a chairman."

"Oh! Aren't you chairman?" The landlord feigned surprise and sighed. "I thought you were. Anyway, you should be. You're better than all of them in every way." He stopped short and called out to the kitchen: "Is dinner ready?"

The cook came in, placed a low-legged table on the *kang*, set on it chopsticks, spoons, saucers, bowls, a decanter, and the first four cold dishes.

"Help yourself. I'm afraid I've no delicacies to offer you, but you can drink some wine. We're old friends, Chairman Yang."

They sat on the *kang*, drinking and chatting. The cook served one course after another—cakes with meat stuffing, stewed mushrooms, goose eggs, trout, steamed roebuck venison. Han assiduously plied his guest with wine, and Little Yang was soon half seas over.

"If I were the team leader, I would have made you chairman of the Peasants' Association long ago. You're as much better than Young Kuo as gold is than silver. Both of you have been with me, so I know the difference only too well."

Little Yang said nothing, but bent his head and drained another cup. Han did not go on, he just continued to ply Yang with food and wine.

"Have some of this venison, Chairman," he urged, pointing his chopsticks to the dish. "I remember you like rich flavouring, so I told them to put in an extra pinch of salt." He called into the inner room: "Ai-cheng! Come in here!"

The white curtain over the door was raised, and Han's daughter appeared, dressed in a gauzy silk tunic with pink flowers on a white ground, and snowy silk trousers. Her tunic was unbuttoned at the neck, revealing a close fitting red bodice. This made the effect all the more dazzling. She sat down on the edge of the *kang*, and looked at Yang out of the corner of her eye. Then she took up the decanter and poured him a cup of wine. Little Yang got a good whiff of the scent from her sleeves and her hair. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he clutched at his cup in such agitation that he spilled the wine all over the table, mat and his clothes.

"Have another cup, Old Yang. Excuse me, but I must leave you for just a minute." Han then left for the west wing.

In the west wing, his wife confronted him and squawked:

"See what you're doing with my daughter! You let her go so cheap!"

"Shut up! What do you know about it?"

In the east wing, Han's daughter was pouring another cup of wine for Yang.

Avoiding her eyes, Yang gazed, fascinated, at her fat, dimpled hands.

"Chairman Yang, do have another cup. This is papa's own wine."

"So you are here! I've been looking high and low for you." A face suddenly appeared outside the window. It was Chang Ching-hsiang, who belonged to Yang's discussion group. The sight of his leader clinking cups with Ai-cheng infuriated him, and he bellowed: "You're having a good time, drinking here! Go on, go on! I'll go and tell them." He was off.

Yang put down his cup, leapt off the *kang*, rushed out, and overtook Chang. Angry and anxious, he wanted to give this colt a good thrashing.

"Who told you I was here?" he thundered.

"They've all arrived for the meeting and been waiting for you a long time. The flapjack man told me you'd gone to Long-neck's place, and from there I came here. You go off on a spree, and have the cheek to shout at me! I'm going to tell them I found you drinking and carrying on with Han's daughter."

Yang decided to soft-soap him.

"Don't tell them, there's a good lad. I'll make my own confession. I'll correct my mistake."

Since he admitted his mistake, and as he was an officer of the Peasants' Association, Chang promised to keep the matter a secret. Yang dismissed the meeting on the pretext that he had a headache. Then he went straight to see Team Leader Hsiao and told him that Chang had worked for the Japanese during the puppet Manchukuo regime and was a traitor. "How can a collaborator be accepted as a member of the Peasants' Association?" he asked.

"I'll look into the matter," said Team Leader Hsiao.

The next day Little Yang came again and said:

"On August 15, 1945, when the Japanese Army surrendered,

Chang stole some of the Japanese military supplies. He picked up a rifle, and stowed it away."

It was impossible to tell whether this was true or not, so they decided to suspend Chang's membership for the time being.

Two days later, Han invited Little Yang a second time. The landlord drank and chatted with him till midnight. Soon the wine went to Yang's head, and he started looking at the curtained door. Han knew what he wanted, but kept silent.

"Have they all gone to bed, Mr. Han?" Yang asked.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Han."

One was a hypocrite, and the other was a liar. But each understood the other, and kept a straight face.

"Oh yes, she isn't feeling well, she may have gone to sleep too." There was something insinuating about the landlord's answer.

Little Yang rose to go.

"What's the hurry? Don't go yet. I've something to ask you, Chairman." Han went into the inner room and, coming back immediately, said:

"Last time you were here, my daughter saw there were holes in your jacket and trousers. So today she would like to take your measurements to make you a new suit. She said: 'All this talk about getting the poor to stand up—why, they're more ragged than ever. It's a shame!' She said too: 'Chao and Kuo and the rest of them are a good-for-nothing lot. It's ridiculous to mention them and Chairman Yang in the same breath. You might as well mix a pearl with peas and sell them at the same price! To think he should rank lower than them! If it were up to me. . . .' I told her not to be childish."

Little Yang remained speechless.

"Shall we go into the inner room?" Han invited.

The host drew aside the curtain, and the guest stepped into the inner room. By the light of the bright ceiling lamp, he saw at once—not the table set with food and wine, not the luxurious furniture, not the calligraphy and painting hung on the smartly papered wall, not the red silk curtains, not the screen on the *kang*, not the mirror above the door—he saw only the girl standing by the *kang*. She stood there in the light clad in blue silk trousers, a white silk jacket, transparent as a cicada's wing, and a pink vest over her

bulging breasts. Her hair was loose over her shoulders as if she had just got up from sleep. At once she set Yang's heart fluttering. He felt quite carried away.

Han asked Yang to sit on the *kang*, then excused himself and left the room.

They drank three cups in succession. Han's daughter got drunk easily. Her cheeks flushed pink as peach blossoms. She undid the top buttons of her jacket to show her pink vest, and mewed:

"Oh! I feel so hot!"

She reached towards the window-sill for a fragrant sandalwood fan, and handed it to Yang. Then she snuggled up close to him and mewed:

"Fan me, won't you?"

Little Yang was beside himself. He grabbed the fan and started waving it so vigorously that he broke it. This sent Ai-cheng into fits of laughter. She collapsed over the table, holding her sides, and shrieked: "Aiya! I shall die of laughing!" She threw back her head and roared with laughter. A folk song goes: "Laughter makes for love!" And this whore knew this quite well. With her laughing, her dimpled hands and the tricks she had learned to use on the Japanese, Morita Taro, she was now angling for Little Yang. He suddenly dropped the fan, and made an abrupt lunge at her. She dodged him skilfully, stopped laughing, and asked icily:

"What are you doing? Are you mad? What's the idea?"

This only excited him the more, and he seized her by the arms. She let out a piercing shriek.

"Help! Mother, come quick! Murder!"

She cried her loudest and sobbed. The next instant, bang! the door was flung open, and in rushed Han's wife and concubine.

The wife yelped:

"What's the matter?"

The concubine shrieked:

"What's happened?"

Little Yang let go of the girl so quickly, she fell back, knocking over the table, sweeping off all the bowls and dishes, food and soup, wine and wineglasses, bean sauce and bean condiment, jam and pickles, shallot and ginger, noodles and dumplings, sour cabbage and sweet cabbage, fried fish and stewed venison. These things spilled all over the *kang* and the floor, and soiled the clothes of

the couple on the *kang*. The smell was something extraordinary. Even Han's wife and concubine came in for a share.

A crowd of people started gathering in and outside the room—men, women and children who lived in Han's compound—making the confusion worse confounded. Ai-cheng clambered off the *kang*, threw herself into her mother's arms, and began sobbing and whining, but without tears, drumming her bare feet on the floor. She had had no time to put on her shoes.

"Mother!" she screamed, then sobbed again. Little Yang also got down, looking dazed, and started making for the door, but it was blocked by the crowd.

"Where are you off to?" Han's wife passed her daughter to the concubine, and threw herself upon Little Yang. She scratched his face, tore his hair, and yanked his clothes, at the same time cursing:

"You've ruined my daughter! You broke into her room in the dead of night and raped her! You're a big man stuffed with the guts of a dog. She's only a child of nineteen, just blossoming. How can she ever get married after what you've done to her?" The mother made her daughter five years younger than she was. "You deserve to be shot!" she added.

"Aiya! Mother!" Ai-cheng continued shrilling in support of her mother who was ramming, scratching, cursing away.

"You deserve to be hacked to pieces!" put in the concubine.

Just then the crowd squeezed sideways to make room for Han himself to sally in, followed by his bodyguard Li Ching-shan. His daughter rushed into his arms and cried: "Dad!"

"You deserve to be shot!" shouted Han's wife again, stabbing at Yang's left cheek with her right fingers.

"You deserve to be hacked to pieces!" screamed the concubine again, stabbing at Yang's right cheek with her left fingers.

"Aiya! Dad! How can I face people again!" sobbed Ai-cheng, but without shedding tears.

"What!" exclaimed Han, and stopped short, as if struck dumb. Then the four of them raised their voices in concert. Finally the landlord said with slow deliberation:

"I treated you as if you were a man. You ate my dinner, you beast, and raped my daughter. Do you realize what a crime you've committed?" He paused and glared at Yang, then shouted:

"Where's Li?"

"Here!" Li answered, and stepped out from behind him.

"Tie him up and send him over to the work team. If they refuse to take the case, send him to the district office, and if they refuse, send him to the county government. He's gone too far. This is an outrage!" Having said this, Han sailed into the outer room. Li and the cook tied Yang up with a hemp rope and pushed him into the outer room. The landlord was sitting in state on the edge of the *kang*, where he had twice entertained Yang with wine. Now he was sitting in judgment there. Yang stood before him to receive his sentence.

"Now tell me yourself what punishment you deserve for raping my daughter?" Han asked, brandishing the big stick he had used so often under the puppet Manchukuo regime.

Yang did not know what to say.

"Open your damned mouth!" shouted Li from behind.

"I'm sorry I had a bit too much to drink—" started Yang, when Han interrupted him to say to the lookers-on:

"You people all go to bed." He turned to his wife and concubine: "You go too." And to his daughter: "Child, go back to your room and rest. It's very late. Don't grieve any more. I'll get even with him for you. Go along now, there's a good girl."

When everybody had gone, he ordered his bodyguard:

"Fetch me pen and paper, to put down his confession." The henchman brought him brush, paper, ink-stick, and ink-slab. He ground the ink-stick on the ink-slab, and his master wrote on the paper. Then Han said:

"Here is his confession in black and white. Read it out to him."

I. Yang Fu-yuan, broke into the Han house at midnight, came upon Han's daughter, and tried to rape her. When she refused, I threw her down on the *kang* and kissed her. This is a true statement of the fact.

Yang protested:

"But I didn't kiss her."

"Dare you deny it?" Han boomed, brandishing his big stick, and Yang was frightened into submission.

"Now tell me how you would like the matter settled—the rough way or the smooth way?"

"Please explain the two ways."

"Just put your mark on this confession, that's the smooth way." Yang made haste to choose the smooth way by dipping his finger in the ink and stamping his finger-print on the paper. Folding the paper and shoving it into his pocket, Han ordered Li:

"Untie him, and then go back to your quarters."

Li and the cook left. All was quiet again in the Han mansion except for some people snoring, the horses chewing mash, and the geese cackling at intervals.

Smoking a cigarette, Han said slowly:

"You and I are in the same boat now." He paused, cast a sidelong glance at Yang, and asked: "Have you got wind of anything?"

"No, nothing," said Yang.

"The Eighth Route Army in Harbin is going east, one trainload after another. To the frontiers! Didn't I tell you, 'They won't stay long.' Now my words have come true. Listen—the Kuomintang army will stage a comeback after the Moon Festival, if not before."

"The Kuomintang army can't get up here," said Yang.

"Who says so? Don't listen to them. My son has written me," lied Han, knowing in his heart that Chiang Kai-shek had been beaten.

"What does your son say in his letter?"

"He says," threatened the landlord, "'Let them take our house and land, and we shall take their heads.'" Seeing Yang quail, he added: "Don't you worry. We've known each other all these years, and I'll protect you. From now on, don't get mixed up with the land reform workers—don't let yourself be taken in by them. That fellow Hsiao is like a man with a hedgehog in his hands—he can neither hold it nor shake it off. He wants to fight me. See if he can! Three times already, and I'm safe and sound. Another three times, and I shall still be better off than you all. If you don't believe me, just wait and see." The cock was crowing. Han waxed more intimate and confidential. "You help me now, and I'll help you later. There have been a lot of meetings recently. What are they up to? If you'll find out and report to me, I'll help you out of any difficulties you have. Soon Ai-cheng's going to make you a new suit. Do you like blue material? I've a good blue material ready. And my daughter can't stay with her parents forever; some time she'll have to marry. She may not be able to make up her

mind right now about you, but we'll talk to her, and I'm sure she'll come round."

"Mr. Han, you're too good to me!" Yang answered, thinking of Ai-cheng's plump hands. "I'll do anything you ask."

"Good," said Han. "You go home now. It's nearly dawn. If you have news, get in touch with my nephew Long-neck Han, and he'll relay it to me."

XVI

BY threats, enticement and coercion, Han Number Six had secured Little Yang, the rag and bone dealer, as his agent. He planned to use Yang to get information about the Peasants' Association and the work team. But he was to be sadly disappointed. The Peasants' Association soon found out about Yang's visits to the landlord, how he had drunk with Han's daughter and got into a fight, and how Han had flattered him. A meeting was called at which Yang was relieved of his duties on the land-distribution committee and expelled from the association. At the same time it was established that Chang Ching-hsiang had no gun—that had all been a lie—so he was restored to membership in the association, and put in charge of the discussion group Little Yang had formerly led.

The work team approved of Chang's appointment, but suggested that he should be criticized for his failure to report to the Peasants' Association after he had seen Yang carousing with Han the first time.

Yang had become the talk of the village. Chao Yu-lin observed: "He eats our food and crawls over to the enemy. He's lucky to have got off so lightly." "It makes me sick just to see him," said Kuo. "He's a spineless worm." was Big Li's comment. And Pai said: "He used to go in for rags and bones, now he goes in for whores." All laughed.

When Old Sun met Yang on the road he hailed him with a broad grin: "Hi, Chairman Yang, where are you going?" And as Yang turned his back on him, the old carter jeered in an undertone: "Look at that so-called chairman—Han's running dog!"

Even Liu Teh-shan, who had formerly wanted to keep in with

both sides, wise-cracked: "He's swilling from Morita's slop-basin. What an appetite!"

Yang found it too hot for him in Yuanmao, so he sneaked to a neighbouring village to sell cats' pelts. People soon forgot him, as if he had died.

Han was at his wit's end. White Goatee, Long-neck Han and Li Chen-chiang had lost much of their usefulness, and now Little Yang had gone too. Discussion groups spread, but he had no idea what they were discussing. Were they still out to get him? He was completely in the dark. He slept little at night, often getting up to gaze through the window at the empty courtyard, silent except for horses chewing their mash.

"The Kuomintang army will never get here," he thought. After turning things over in his mind for a long time, he finally decided to cache the remainder of his valuables. At night, by the piles of firewood and under his courtyard wall, picks could be heard striking against stone.

Han's heavily loaded horses, their hooves wrapped in cotton pads, were driven out of the village by Li Ching-shan and others. But this too came to the ears of the Peasants' Association shortly afterwards, and Pai posted two men, armed with the new spears, to keep close watch outside the Han mansion day and night. The landlord could no longer move his horses and portable property away.

How did the Peasants' Association know what was going on in his house? That was something he could not understand. In fact, it was because the Peasants' Association had become an organization of the masses, and he and his running dogs were being watched by the peasants.

Han's swineherd, Wu Chia-fu, was thirteen years old. It was he whom Kuo and Big Li had heard Han and Long-neck Han discussing not long before this. One day this little swineherd was driving a drove of pigs homeward, swinging a switch twice his own length, when Kuo came down the road. They started talking and Kuo asked him to join his discussion group.

That very night, after the Han house had gone to bed, Wu slid quietly off the *kang*, tiptoed across the courtyard, opened the wicket-gate, and was off to the meeting. There he poured out his bitterness. After the death of his father, Han had seized his mother.

But in less than a year he had got tired of her and sold her to a brothel in Shuangcheng. The little boy had tended the landlord's pigs for four years, forbidden to leave. The previous year he had wanted to leave, but Han had told him: "You can't go till you've repaid me the money I spent on your father's coffin. A father's debt must be paid by his son. Tend my pigs for five more years, and then I'll see about it."

When he finished, Wu was on the verge of tears. He tugged at Kuo's arm and said:

"Big Brother Kuo, save me. . . ."

"Don't worry. From now on we won't let you suffer again," Kuo promised.

Thenceforth the swineherd slipped out every night and reported to the discussion group all that was going on in the landlord's house. This was how the Peasants' Association had come to know of Little Yang's visits to Han and the transfer and the burying underground of the latter's goods and chattels. After joining this group, Wu's thin face was often lit up by a smile.

In all his four years in Han's house, the little swineherd had not known a happy moment. Thirteen years old, he looked only ten; because of his hard life he was nothing but skin and bones. All by himself he had to look after over twenty pigs and a number of sucklings. When he returned in the evening he ate cold leftovers, and this went on day after day, year after year. He slept with the other hired hands in a shed where hay was stored, adjoining the pigsty. The place stank, and the stench attracted mosquitoes—he was often kept awake all night by their bites. In winter he had no bedding and woke up several times during the night shivering. The Han family never spoke to him except to curse him, and the bodyguard often beat him. Now as he told his story, he sobbed, and many women and children were moved to tears.

The small group meetings had been going on for about a fortnight, and Han was worrying about the situation. One night, unable to sleep, he was pacing the courtyard, when he heard dogs barking in the distance, and the sound of many footsteps. His dogs joined the chorus, as the footsteps drew nearer. Han quickly withdrew under the eaves of the west wing and watched the gateway. He saw the wicket-door open and a figure flit in. By the light of the

stars he could see it was Wu. Now he lunged forward and caught the boy by the arm, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Li, come quick! Thief! Thief!"

The henchman rushed out, stick in hand.

They dragged the boy into the east wing. Han plumped down on the edge of the *kang* and asked, panting:

"Where have you been?"

"None of your business," shouted the boy, surprised at his own courage.

"Hum! So you're putting on airs too!" said Li, outraged to find that the little swineherd who usually cowered before his stick now dared to wag his tongue and defy even the master. Li lifted the stick and boomed: "If it's not the master's business, it's the business of this stick!" The stick came down with a thump on the back of the recoiling boy.

"Stop!" Han ordered, trying to suppress his anger. "Let him say what happened at the discussion group. If he does, we'll spare him."

"I won't tell you anything, not even if you kill me." The little swineherd tossed up his head defiantly.

Han's face reddened and his neck swelled:

"So you want to stand up, do you? I'll teach you to stand up! Yank off his clothes, Li, while I fetch the whip."

Pinned to the ground, the boy screamed: "Help! Han Number Six is killing me!"

Li hastily gagged him by ramming a rag into his mouth. It was nearly dawn, and everything was still. Wu's cry for help had reached the two militiamen patrolling the road hard by the Han mansion. Now one of them was running towards the Han mansion while the other sprinted down the road, blowing his whistle and crying: "Han's killing someone!"

The little swineherd was lying on the ground, his clothes ripped off. Han planted a foot on his back, thinking: "I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb." Lifting the whip, he declared:

"I'm going to beat you to death!"

Whack! Whack! Whack! The horsewhip rose and fell, and bloody lines appeared one after another on the boy's bare back and buttocks. The bodyguard added his stick to his master's whip, beating the lad on his head and body. The blood spattered Han's

white silk trousers. Soon Wu ceased to move. He had fainted. Grinding his teeth, the landlord shouted:

"Go quick and dig a hole in the stable. He wanted to stand up—he'll never stand up again!"

As Li was running across the courtyard, he heard someone hammering on the gate. Presently more and more people could be heard outside. The dogs barked—people had climbed the east wall.

"Run, Mr. Han!" cried Li. He himself darted to the backyard, changed his mind, ran back to drag a ladder to the backyard, and leaned it against the wall. When he got to the top of the wall, he half jumped half fell into the ditch on the other side. Then getting quickly to his feet, he ran through an elm grove into a vegetable garden, trampling upon gourd and bean vines, and through it into a willow grove, until he reached Long-neck Han's house.

The whole village was agog. The sun was reddening the clouds above the horizon, and the cocks were crowing. Villagers ran towards the Han mansion by different routes—across the highway, over the fields, through vegetable gardens, from behind woodstacks, around wheat ricks. Some brought with them hoes, axes, pokers. Some had picked up elm shoots and willow switches from the woodstacks on the way. Men, women, old women and children were converging on the road leading to the Han mansion. They formed a human torrent; the sun behind them lighting up their shining, shaved heads and tattered grey felt hats, as they surged forward like a tidal wave.

Running at the head were Chao and Pai, followed by the newly-formed militia armed with newly-forged spears. They reached the great gateway and pounded on the huge black door, but it remained shut. Then they dashed to the wall on the east side. They looked up—the wall was over twenty feet high, they could not climb it. Chao handed his rifle to Pai, and ran with a militiaman to a nearby house for a ladder.

Soon they had hauled a big pine log over and leaned it against the wall. Chao climbed up to the top, and leaped down into the backyard. Four great dogs rushed at him, baying. Back against the wall, he stooped to pick up a stone and hit the first one on the head. It yelped in pain and turned tail, holding the other three off effectively. In his jump Chao had twisted his leg, but now he

hobbled quickly to the gate and unbolted it. People outside, including Team Leader Hsiao, Little Wang, Liu Sheng, and the armed guards, burst into the Han mansion.

Chao took back his rifle from Pai, mounted the bayonet and rushed into the courtyard, followed by Pai, Kuo and the militiamen. Bayonets and spearheads with red tassels were glittering in the morning sun. While Pai and the militiamen threw a cordon around the north wing, Chao and Kuo rushed into the east wing, where they nearly tripped over a figure lying on the floor beside the *kang*. It was Wu. When Chao bent down and stretched out a hand, he was taken aback at the touch of the warm blood. The boy was lying in a pool of blood. He felt his heart still beating, and said, "He's still alive. Come on, let's lift him onto the *kang*. Old Pai, you go and fetch a doctor."

In lifting the boy, Chao and Kuo got blood all over their hands. The people who had followed them in stood aghast. Then, from among the crowd, Team Leader Hsiao shouted:

"Catch the murderer! Quick! Don't let him escape!"

This roused Chao and Kuo, who immediately squeezed through the cluster of people and led a few militiamen into the inner room, where they found the women and children sitting on the *kang* and the men standing before the mirrored wardrobe. They looked at the peasants with hatred in their eyes.

"Where's Han?" Chao demanded.

"He's out," answered Han's wife briefly.

"Have you brought ropes with you?" Chao asked a militiaman.

"No."

"Go and get some, and tie them all up, quick!"

Chao and Kuo searched the room, flinging open trunks and cabinets and looking into all the corners where a man might be hidden. The trunks were stuffed with clothes and bolts of cloth, but they had no eyes for these in their impatience to find Han. However, though they searched high and low, they could find no trace of him.

"You stay here," Chao told Kuo, "and make them say where he's gone to. Beat them if they won't talk, I'll take the responsibility. I'm going now to search the west wing."

The militiaman brought in ropes, and Kuo proceeded to tie up Han's wife. "Brother Kuo," she whimpered, "be merciful!"

"None of your hypocrisy," he answered.

He got a militiaman to help him tie up Han's wife, then approached the concubine. She suddenly hurled herself to the ground and went into a swoon, whereupon all the other family members cried out: "Aiya! She's dying!" Ai-cheng began whining without tears. Stupefied, Kuo and the militiaman stopped short. At this moment Old Sun came in and, sizing up the situation, shouted:

"Get up, you! Don't try any tricks, or I'll beat you! If I beat you to death, that'll be one bad egg the less. Get back, you people, I need room to swing my stick."

Before the old carter had raised his elm sapling, the concubine opened her eyes and got hastily to her feet. She kneeled and begged him:

"Don't hit me! I'm up!"

"Why did you play that trick? Tell me!" he shouted.

"She's ill. That wasn't any trick," the wife answered for her.

"Really she's ill—a woman's illness," Ai-cheng confirmed.

"I'll kill you!" Old Sun shouted, this time really lifting the elm stick.

"Aiya! Don't hit me, I'll tell you—I'll tell you, Uncle," cried the concubine, covering her face with both her hands.

"Don't uncle me—it'll be ill luck to be uncled by you. Hurry up and tell me." He threw away the stick.

"I took a drug, an overdose."

"I knew it! I'm fifty this year and I've travelled up and down these parts. Think I don't know all your tricks?" the carter declared, chuckling.

"Where's Han Number Six?" asked Kuo. "Tell us quick."

"I really don't know!" The concubine tried hard to sound pathetic.

More and more people came into the outer room. Team Leader Hsiao had sent Little Wang for medical aid, and he was not back yet. The little swineherd was lying on his face, with red and purple welts across his back, his limbs and head gashed and bleeding as if somebody had slashed him with a knife. Blood was still flowing from his wounds. Old Tien came forward, and when he saw the boy he shed tears, recalling the tragedy of his own daughter, an earlier victim of Han's. He felt as if this was his own child before



. . . burst into the Han mansion.



him, and took off his tattered jacket to spread over the mangled boy, when Team Leader Hsiao stopped him, saying:

"No hurry, Old Tien. Let people see."

Little Wang brought in some ointment and bandages, and carefully administered first aid. Chao squeezed into the room and reported to Team Leader Hsiao, gasping: "Han has escaped!"

"He has?" The team leader started at this report but, after a moment's reflection, answered calmly:

"He can't have gone far. Go quickly and search in all directions." He stepped out into the courtyard and divided the guards, the militiamen, and the activists into five search parties. They immediately looked in the servants' quarters, mill, beancurd room, lumber room, stable, pigsty, and woodpile, in every nook and corner. There was no trace of Han except for a ladder leaning against the west wall. He must have climbed over the wall, and escaped! Team Leader Hsiao hurried around to the outside and found on the ground near the ditch below the wall two different sets of footprints embedded in the soft mud—one the imprint of a rubber sole and the other of a cloth sole. He followed the footprints to the east end of the ditch, where the rubber sole branched northward and the cloth sole southward. He paused there and thought a while, then walked on northward with Chao and Wan.

"Run and fetch three horses from the courtyard," he told Wan, then asked Chao: "Can you ride bareback?"

"Sure."

"Good. Then there's no need to saddle the horses. Be quick, Wan." Pai had caught up with them, and Hsiao said to him:

"Pai, you give chase southward—Kuo eastward—Big Li westward. Take several guards along, each of you. And go on horseback. You must find him. Tell them these are my orders." He pulled out a pocket-book, tore off a page, and scribbled in pencil: "Section Leader Chang, order armed guards to go with Kuo, Pai and Big Li out of the East, South, and West Gates in pursuit of Han. You take two guards and help Chang and the militiamen keep watch in the village and look out for the criminal. Hsiao."

Hsiao then turned to Chao, and said with a grin:

"Here's your chance to show your marksmanship, Old Chao. Have you fired a rifle before?"

"Sure, I'm not too bad a shot," said Chao.

"Good. If he attempts to run, shoot him." Team Leader Hsiao turned around and saw Wan approaching on horseback, leading two other horses. He called to him:

"Old Wan, get a move on! Gallop!"

Wan dug his heels into the horse's sides and galloped like the wind. The roadside geese fled in fright, cackling, flapping their great snow-white wings. The pigs and sheep rammed their heads into the cracks in the fences of vegetable gardens. The horses' hooves seemed scarcely to touch the ground as they flew forward. But still Team Leader Hsiao was shouting: "Faster! Faster!"

In another instant, Wan caught up with Team Leader Hsiao and Chao who immediately vaulted upon the horses. Together they galloped on. Without turning, Hsiao called out: "Take out your gun, Old Wan. Watch the footprints, follow in their track."

They rode out through the North Gate and reached the river. All the way the footprints were visible in the mud and in the ruts. But when they crossed the bridge the tracks turned aside and vanished!

"No more footprints!" Team Leader Hsiao ejaculated.

"The wind's high along the river. It's dried the road, so footprints can't be seen," said Chao, scanning the path beside the river.

Team Leader Hsiao looked over the river and the two banks under the sultry sun. Some of the willow leaves were fading; the reeds on the river banks were half green, half yellow; the red tassels of the maize were beginning to wither; the kaoliang was a deep red. It was high autumn weather. "He may be hiding in the fields," thought Hsiao. "We must be careful."

"Look out, you fellows. Watch the fields."

They came to a point where two paths forked out. One went towards Yenshou, a town in the north, where another work team had been sent. The other path ran along the river bank towards the west. Which way had Han gone? There were no more footprints. The pursuers did not know which way to go. Team Leader Hsiao pulled up his horse to consider the matter. "He can't have chosen a place where there's another work team," he thought. He spurred forward again along the river bank. The clear water of the river reflected upside-down the shadows of the men and galloping horses. On the bank in front of them they saw a man standing on a spring-

board, smoking a pipe, adjusting a net suspended from a trestle. At the approach of the horsemen, the fisherman turned around and greeted them with a smile:

"Where are you off to, Chairman Chao?"

Seeing it was Old Chu, a member of the Peasants' Association, Chao dismounted at once and asked:

"Old Chu, did you see Han passing by here a while ago?"

"No, I didn't," he answered, beckoning Chao to come nearer.

"Come and have a look at the big dogfish I've caught today!"

Chao handed Wan the reins and stepped onto the spring-board. Old Chu whispered to him: "Look in the fish shed over there, under the straw."

Chao jumped off the spring-board, levelled his gun, and sprinted towards the small shed not far from the bank. He burst in and parted the straw on the ground with the muzzle of the gun. A big head with a receding hair line showed through the damp, yellow straw. This head tried to wriggle back into hiding again. Here at last was the enemy of the people of Yuanmao who had so nearly escaped. Burning with anger, Chao rammed the rifle-butt down on Han's arm, cursing:

"Bastard! Where do you think you can fly to? To the sky?"

Team Leader Hsiao and Wan entered the shed, ducking their heads at the entrance.

They found a rope in one corner, bound the landlord hand and foot, loaded him onto Wan's black horse, tied him to it astride, and then headed back slowly for the village.

"I'm coming too," said Old Chu. He drew in his net, collected his fish, and poured them into two baskets suspended on the two ends of a bamboo, which he flung across his shoulder. Then he hurried after the others.

"Isn't this a big fish!" Old Chu said with a grin. "But it has to be very carefully handled—it bites terribly." He pulled out of his pocket a silver dollar and added: "Look! What's this?" He showed the coin to Team Leader Hsiao and Chao and explained: "Han came running up, all in a sweat, and asked to hide in the shed. He gave me this silver dollar, and told me not to let on."

"Why, then, did you tell us?" Team Leader Hsiao asked, smiling.

"I'm a member of the Peasants' Association—how could I hide

a landlord and local despot? Serves him right for coming this way!"

"He couldn't have got away, whatever way he'd run," Chao observed.

At this moment a crowd of people came marching down the road, the red tassels on their spears waving, and with Little Wang and Liu Sheng at their head. They had been afraid that Team Leader Hsiao might run into bandits, so the villagers had volunteered to come in support.

When they saw the landlord had been caught, they clustered around him, raising their sticks and spears. But Chao stopped them, saying:

"Wait. We'll take him back and give him a public trial. We'll let all the villagers state their grievances."

But the angry peasants were not to be stopped. They blocked the road, so the horses could not proceed.

Chao, Team Leader Hsiao, Little Wang, and Liu Sheng laid their heads together and decided that Han must be taken back to the village for trial. Chao vaulted onto a chestnut horse and declared at the top of his voice:

"Clear the way, please. We must take him back and hold a mass meeting. Not everybody's here. Han's the enemy of all the people of Yuanmao. All the people of Yuanmao want to get even with him. We want to avenge ourselves, so do they. Let's go back and hold a big meeting."

"What if he escapes again?" a voice asked.

"Just let him try!" said Chao.

At that the crowd fell back. As the mare carrying Han passed through, people now and then struck out at him with their sticks.

The search parties led by Big Li, Kuo and Pai came back to the village at sunset in dejection because they had not found Han. But when they heard he had been caught, they were overjoyed. They rushed into the playground where he was, and were going to shower blows on him when Team Leader Hsiao stopped them.

"Bastard! Leading us such a dance!" they cursed. Han was locked up. More than twenty villagers volunteered to stand on watch day and night around the shack where he was held.

Team Leader Hsiao's first words when he got back to the schoolhouse were: "How is the little swineherd?"

"He has been sent to the county hospital," Little Wang told him.

Acting on the suggestion of the Peasants' Association, Team Leader Hsiao had all Han's family put under house arrest. The militia were ordered to guard his property and livestock, and the Peasants' Association sealed up the trunks, cases and cabinets. Later, thanks to the information of the swineherd, Han's valuables hidden somewhere beneath the courtyard wall and under the piles of firewood were all unearthed and clues to the discovery of his portable property which had been transferred to other villages were also found.

A few days later, it was found that White Goatee had fled to the south of the Sungari while Long-neck Han and Li Ching-shan had both gone to Taching Mountain to join the bandits. That was the only thing that marred the general joy.

XVII

THE news of Han's recapture stirred the whole village. During the last fortnight, in their small group meetings the villagers had shed their former fears and acquired a new political consciousness and courage to carry on the struggle. More and more activists were appearing—they were like torches kindling fires everywhere. Han's cruelty to the little swineherd was merely another small instalment in a long series of crimes, but, now that the masses had been awakened, it was enough to ignite a great fire of hatred and revenge.

The flames were blazing higher and higher, up to the skies, burning down the feudalism which had obstructed China's progress for thousands of years, giving birth to a new society. The wrongs which the peasantry had suffered from generation to generation were the fuel for the fire.

On the evening of Han's recapture, the work team and the Peasants' Association called a meeting of activists in Chao's vegetable garden, under the gourd trellis, to prepare for the mass meeting. The little white gourd blossoms amid the green leaves were particularly beautiful in the setting sun. Team Leader Hsiao

prompted the activists to give their own ideas as to how the struggle should be organized.

Everybody put in a word and soon a lively discussion was on. Sometimes several people, or even several groups, tried to make themselves heard at the same time. There was a regular din.

Chao Yu-lin, who was presiding over the meeting, called out: "Don't all speak at the same time! Take your turn."

"Han must be bound tight," Pai suggested. "If he's let loose, the villagers may wonder what we're up to again."

"Old Sun, it's your turn now," said Chao to the carter.

"All the bitches in the Han family should be tied up too, and let our women tackle them. One meeting for the men, and one for the women."

"That's no good," said Chang Ching-hsiang. "If you divide the masses, there will be confusion. Let's fight Han first. After the big trunk's felled, the twigs and branches are easy to deal with."

"You must post plenty of guards, Old Pai," warned Kuo. "It's no joking matter. We mustn't allow any disorder. We'll get everybody ill-treated by Han to go up in turn, to state his case, settle accounts and pour out his bitterness. A space must be left in front of Han, so that people can step up and accuse him."

"The accusations should be short," said Big Li. "We don't want people to run on and on. That way there'd be no end. It would take weeks to describe everything Han's done."

"You must be more careful too this time, Old Li," warned Pai. "Don't let Han's running dogs in again."

Old Chu added: "If any running dogs come to the meeting tomorrow, truss them up on the spot. If you can't do it alone, we'll all lend a hand."

After a pause, Pai asked: "Can we beat him?"

"Did he ever beat you?" Chao countered.

"I'll say he did!"

"Well, then, why not pay him back in his own coin?" Chao grinned.

Thereupon Pai addressed the whole assembly:

"Tomorrow let's each bring a big stick to the meeting, to accuse Big Stick Han. Pay him back in kind."

After a word with Team Leader Hsiao, Chao announced:

"The meeting is adjourned. Tomorrow we'll hold the trial. Have your breakfast early, and be at the meeting in good time."

"Why wait until tomorrow?" asked Chang. "Why not have the mass meeting tonight?"

"When we go back now, we'll call another meeting of the discussion groups, so that the villagers will be well prepared. Tomorrow we've got to get Han down," Chao answered. He turned to Team Leader Hsiao and asked: "Have you anything to say to us, Team Leader?"

"You've all made good suggestions," said Hsiao. "Now we'll go back and think them over again. I wonder if you should elect a presidium for tomorrow? Can't think of anything else."

After the meeting, the activists went back and hastily called their small groups together. Some of them broke up when it was dark. All the peasants prepared sticks. Some of the meetings went on till midnight. Due to the fact that they were organized and had a core of reliable workers, after discussion and preparation the poor villagers were no longer afraid. The biggest change was in Old Sun, who headed one group. He no longer said that he did not want to be an activist, and had rallied around him not only old carters like himself but also poor youngsters. He was as garrulous as ever and made a speech to his small group, using many of the new political terms.

"We're all activists," he said, "and activists are brave fellows who forge ahead through difficulties and never back out. How could we lead the masses otherwise? You tell me, is that right or not?"

"Right!" his men responded together.

"Are we or are we not travelling the revolutionary road? If we are, and the revolution's just going to succeed, how can we still be afraid of wolves in front and tigers behind? What ideology is that?"

Under his influence, all the men in his group prepared to speak out in the fourth struggle against Han Number Six the next day.

The next morning was a bright, late autumn day. The sky was a limpid blue, the wind had dried the ground, and the wind-blown fields presented a motley of colours. The kaoliang was yellow. The red stalks of buckwheat were topped with little white blossoms as if sprinkled with snow or frost. A few crimson tassels

still hung from odd plants of maize that had ripened late, but most of the tassels in the ears of corn had withered. The thick bean leaves looked like so many yellow blotches from the distance. Before the windows and under the eaves of the peasants' huts hung strings of red chillies, clusters of sloes, red turnips, and ripe corn-cobs. The cottage eaves were as colourful as the fields.

The peasants were doubly happy at the prospect of a good harvest and the overthrow of Han.

At the crack of dawn, the villagers streamed in groups to the Han mansion, swinging sticks in their hands. By the time it was really light, the courtyard was filled to overflowing. People sat on the wall, on top of the gatehouse, on maize stacks, on window-sills and on the roofs.

Women and children were singing a newly composed song, set to a folk tune:

*The wrongs, the hate of a thousand years,
Can be avenged, now the Party's here!
Han Number Six! Han Number Six!
The people are out for your blood!*

At first only the women and children sang, then youngsters joined in. Soon more voices had swelled the chorus, and even Old Sun was singing. Then the village band struck up! Old Chu was beating a big drum and other men were sounding gongs and striking cymbals.

"He's coming! He's coming!" When this cry went up, all eyes turned to the gateway. People longed to go out and see, but no one could move for the crowd.

Four militiamen had brought Han from the shack to the mass meeting. The streets on the way were lined with militiamen. There were sentries even in the turrets of his mansion. He was overawed by this display of the people's power. Children skipped behind the landlord, while a few ran on ahead to the Han mansion to proclaim:

"Here he comes! Here he comes!"

With a rifle slung across his shoulder, Pai was patrolling the road. He told the men in the turrets to watch the fields around lest Long-neck Han and Li Ching-shan bring Han's younger brother and his bandits to his rescue.

Pai had had so much work and anxiety lately, he had lost a lot of weight. He had changed his lazy ways too, and was always on

the run. On the night before the mass meeting he came home in the small hours. When he lay down on the *kang*, his wife woke up and, rubbing her eyes, asked him:

"Some steamed bread in the pot. Do you want some?"

"No, I don't want any," he answered. "Han's going to be tried tomorrow. You go too." He was unable to keep his eyes open.

"What should a woman go for?" she asked.

"Don't you want to avenge Little Kou-tzu's death?" he said, then began snoring.

"I daren't speak at a big meeting. I should dry up after a few words."

But no answer came from the other side of the *kang*. Mrs. Pai fell to recalling the tragic death of her baby boy again. At sunrise she wakened Pai, and left for the meeting place after him. She didn't want to miss the excitement. She found many women standing together by the wall. She joined Mrs. Chao and Old Tien's blind wife, and began chatting with them.

When Han reached the platform in the middle of the courtyard, shouts went up on all sides. Chao blew his whistle and cried:

"Order, please! No small meetings now! Take your places properly. Today is our struggle against the traitor-landlord, Han Feng-chi. Now's time for us poor men to speak out and take vengeance. You can come up one by one to settle scores."

A young man with a spear in one hand and a stout stick in the other ran up to Han. He glared at the landlord, then turned to face the people. It was Chang Ching-hsiang.

"Han Number Six is my mortal enemy. In 1941, he refused to pay my wages after I'd worked as his farmhand for a year. Instead, he had me sent for forced labour. When I ran away, he put my mother in prison, and there she died. Today I want to avenge my mother's death. Can I beat him?"

"Go ahead!"

"Beat him to death!"

From all sides the shouts thundered. The peasants raised the sticks and spears in their hands, and surged forward. The militia-men held their spears horizontally to stop them, but the crowd burst through. Han took in the situation, and the moment Chang lifted his stick, he collapsed to the ground. Chao saw through his trick, and shouted:

"You fraud! You fell down before the stick had touched you."

A whole forest of sticks were raised. The situation was getting out of hand. Some blows fell on the wrong heads and backs. Old Sun's tattered felt hat was knocked off and trampled underfoot. When he was stretching out his hand for it, he caught a blow on the arm.

An old woman was hit on the leg, but she said nothing. The villagers were so filled with hatred for Han they felt no resentment over blows received by mistake. Chao boomed:

"Drag him up. Let someone else accuse him!"

The big head with bald temples was hoisted up from the ground. A middle-aged woman in a patched and repatched blue jacket came up and, brandishing a stick over Han's head, accused him:

"You—you killed my boy!"

The stick fell on Han's shoulder, but when she wanted to strike again, she had no strength in her arm. She dropped the stick, threw herself upon him and bit his shoulder and arm, not knowing how to vent her hate. When she mentioned her son she started weeping. Other women, especially the older ones, cried in sympathy, for they knew her to be Mrs. Chang, a widow. In 1939, her only son had married. A month later Han saw the bride was pretty, and started paying them daily visits. The young husband saw red, and one day he grabbed a kitchen knife to have it out with him. But the landlord took to his heels, declaring: "Fine! Just wait!" That same night, the son was sent off to a labour camp, where he was strangled to death by the Japanese military at Han's request. Han then forced the young widow to live with him, and when he tired of her sold her to a brothel.

In grief and anger Mrs. Chang shouted:

"Give back my boy!"

She rushed forward, and the others surged after her. The women wanted their husbands and sons. The men wanted their fathers and brothers. Sobs mingled with curses. Little Wang wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. From time to time Team Leader Hsiao told Liu Sheng:

"Put it on record—another murder by him."

One accusation followed another. Towards evening, the record in Liu Sheng's notebook showed seventeen murders including Kuo's father frozen to death, Chao's daughter starved to death, Pai's baby

boy hurled to death, and Old Tien's daughter flogged to death. Then there were forty-three women who had been raped or carried off only to be sold when Han and his son tired of them. When these figures were announced, there was no preventing the people from taking their revenge. A forest of sticks waved in the air, and came down on Han.

"Beat him to death! Beat him to death!" somebody shouted.

"Don't let him live another day!" roared another angry voice.

"Let him pay with his life!"

"Tear him to pieces or I won't be avenged!" cried Old Tien's wife in a quavering voice.

Mrs. Pai wanted to help the old woman squeeze to the front to beat Han, but it was no use. They were knocked down by the crowd. The younger woman quickly scrambled to her feet, hoisted up the older one, and steered her out of harm's way.

The accusations went on. Han Feng-chi—traitor, local despot and feudal landlord—was now known to have killed seventeen persons, while there were many others whom he had murdered secretly. He had taken men from every poor family for unpaid labour in his house. He charged such high rent, all his tenants—except for running dogs like Li Chen-chiang—found themselves ruined at the end of the year, and had to give him free labour, fodder and seeds, and make over their horses to him to make up the rent. He never paid his farmhands. They were lucky if they worked for him for a year and got three or four cattles of pork at New Year. Any he took a dislike to, he got rid of by asking Morita Taro, the Japanese gendarme officer who lived in his house, to send to labour camps. And very few who went ever came back. He had made his poor neighbours sink a well, but forbade them to take water from it unless they worked for him. He had imprisoned people whose pigs had strayed into his vegetable gardens and trampled one blade of grass. His land holdings amounted to over ten thousand *mou*, of which he had inherited one thousand—all the rest had been acquired by foul means.

The villagers were not interested in such accusations, however. "We know all that," they said. "He's never done a good thing in his life, but he's had a hand in everything bad." Then they shouted: "We won't break up, we won't go home, we won't have supper tonight, unless he dies today!"

Team Leader Hsiao got a telephone message through to the county government and asked for instructions. Meanwhile, Liu Sheng gave the villagers some further information: In 1935 Han had killed nine members of the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies at Hsiaoshantze. After the Japanese surrender, he was made chief of staff of the reactionary Kuomintang troops under the command of the gangster Pei Lai and concurrently Kuomintang secretary general and interim administrative head for Yuanmao. He had set up an armed force to fight against the United Democratic Army and killed another of its men.

"Ten more lives," said Tien. "That makes twenty-seven men he has murdered!"

"Wipe out the Kuomintang bandits! Down with Chiang Kai-shek and his gang!" Little Wang shouted, raising his right arm, and over a thousand voices shouted with him.

Team Leader Hsiao came back, stood before the platform, and announced:

"The county government agrees with the people of Yuanmao that a murderer should forfeit his own life."

"Hooray for the democratic government!" shouted Hua Yung-hsi, a bachelor from Shantung Province. "Hooray for the Communist work team!" Men, women, and children shouted and clapped. The noise was like thunder.

Chao and Pai, carrying their rifles, pushed Han out towards the East Gate of the village. Kuo and Big Li followed behind with over a thousand people at their heels. They were shouting slogans, singing songs, blowing trumpets, beating gongs and drums. Old Mrs. Tien, who had lost the sight of both eyes, hobbled along with Mrs. Pai supporting her.

"I've been hoping and crying these three long years for a day like this," sobbed the old woman. "Thanks to Chairman Mao Tse-tung and the Communist Party, my daughter has been avenged!"

XVIII

AFTER the tree of feudalism in the Han household was felled, more and more peasants took an active part in village affairs. The Peasants' Association expanded its activities. Many of the villagers

applied to the work team for permission to join the Association, and when Team Leader Hsiao referred them to Chao Yu-lin, they asked:

"Can he arrange it?"

"Why not?" Hsiao answered.

Chao was busy dealing with a spate of applications. People came day and night, giving him no time even for meals.

"Old Chao, may I join?" the widower Hua Yung-hsi asked.

"Get two men to recommend you," Chao answered.

"Chairman Chao, do me a favour—write me on as a member," Chang Fu-ying, the proprietor of the flapjack shop, requested.

"You want to join too?" Chao asked, looking him in the face.

"Chairman Chao, I've long been favourably impressed by the revolution," Chang Fu-ying answered with a smile.

"I suppose that's why you arranged that phoney land distribution with Little Yang," retorted Chao scathingly. Seeing Chao's attitude, Chang started dejectedly out. But he turned at the door and pleaded:

"Chairman Chao, I admit my mistake and promise to correct it. May I join later on?"

"That depends. We'll see how you behave from now on." Chao turned his back on him to attend to someone else. When Chang got home he told his assistant: "Well, Chao is a bigwig now, fiercer even than a Manchukuo police officer!" Nevertheless, he was anxious to find somebody to recommend him to the Peasants' Association.

Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, also came to the Chairman of the Peasants' Association.

"Do you really want to join? Aren't you afraid of Han Number Six?" Chao asked sarcastically.

"You're joking, Chairman. Who's afraid of a dead man?"

"A member of the Peasants' Association has to be willing to stand guard and run errands, wind or rain. Can you take it?"

"My son can do sentry duty for me."

"What about you?"

"One of the bones in my leg is out of joint. Besides, I'm getting on in years," he explained.

"Then, what do you want to join the Peasants' Association for?" Chao demanded.

Cornered, Liu mumbled something and backed out.

Li Chen-chiang, a rich tenant who used to rent land from Han

Number Six, sent someone to say that he would make a present of four of his eight horses to the Peasants' Association. He asked to be admitted to the Association.

"No, that's out of the question." Chao was adamant. "Nor need he offer his horses now. Whether his horses should be confiscated or not is a matter for the people to decide. You tell him, it's not up to me."

When Li heard this, he hated Chao and the Peasants' Association more than ever, and decided to live fast. Every day his family of seven mouths tucked in. The evening after Han was shot, there was no moon and the stars were hidden by clouds. Li's courtyard was pitch black and he had blown out the lamp in his room when he and his son went to the pigsty and took out a fat white porker.

The father muzzled its mouth with a gunny-bag while the son tied its legs with straw ropes. The two of them hauled the animal into the west wing. His smallest boy stood watch outside the gate. His wife, daughter-in-law, and second and third sons crowded in and covered up the windows with gunny-bags before lighting a bean-oil lamp. Then, all came together and knifed it noiselessly, and wiped up every speck of blood. That same night they boiled a whole cauldronful of pork, and the entire family gorged themselves. Eating so much meat made them thirsty, and they had to get up several times during the night to ladle themselves dipperfuls of cold water. The next day the whole family was suffering from loose stomachs.

After that, the whole family became lazy, Li often lying on the *kang* when the sun was high in the sky. They stopped feeding the horses regularly, and would not get up at night to give them fodder. Eight fat horses became so lean that their bones jutted out, and one colt died for lack of milk.

Chao was out all day, too busy to help his wife with domestic chores. One evening, when he came home a little earlier than usual, she told him that the fuel supply had run out. The next day, he asked Kuo to go to the Association for him, while he himself went out through the North Gate at daybreak and across the river to cut wood. He piled the wood on the river bank, thinking he would take another half day's leave the next day and borrow a cart from a neighbour to haul home the fuel. On the way back he met the eldest son of Li Chen-chiang, who greeted him and asked with a grin:

"Been cutting firewood, Uncle Chao?"

"Yes, our fuel has run out. My wife has been borrowing from the neighbours, and complaining," answered Chao. He walked on, suspecting nothing.

At midnight, the wind blowing, someone raised the alarm:

"Fire! Fire! Outside the North Gate!"

Chao hastily got up and, slinging his rifle across his shoulder, ran towards the North Gate. He found a big crowd there watching the flames leaping up in the distance. The river gleamed in the reflected light. Team Leader Hsiao suspected bandits, and immediately sent Section Leader Chang and his armed guards out there on horseback. Chao and Kuo went with them. Not a bandit did they find, however. The fire turned out to be Chao's wood blazing away in the high wind. Soon the whole pile was reduced to cinders. Chao was too busy to cut any more wood, and his wife was hard put to it to manage.

Like the activists of the Peasants' Association, the land reform workers were pestered by landlords, big and small, offering land and houses, and declaring that they "saw light" now. Goodman Tu was the first to come.

"Team Leader Hsiao," he said, "I've been meaning to call on you for a long time." Hsiao looked at his round, fleshy, ruddy face, with its two slits of eyes.

"I understand"—sitting respectfully on a stool opposite Hsiao, Tu fixed him with beady eyes—"I understand the Communist Party has sympathy for the old and poor, and I'm willing to contribute a few pieces of land—just to show my good will. I hope you'll kindly recommend me to the Peasants' Association."

"Chao and Kuo are responsible for the Peasants' Association," Team Leader Hsiao answered. "Go and find them."

"They can neither read nor write. How can they manage affairs?" Goodman Tu asked contemptuously.

"Why not?" Team Leader Hsiao rapped out. "And the Peasants' Association doesn't want those who read, write but think in the Manchukuo style."

Tu blushed. His was a hundred per cent Manchukuo mind. He made a bow, and said apologetically:

"You're right. You're right. I'll call on them."

Goodman Tu decided to bypass Chao, thinking to himself:

"That Chao fellow's not obliging at all. Kuo's younger and may be easier to deal with." He knew that Kuo, Pai and Big Li were in the Han mansion, supervising the distribution of Han's belongings to the poor. On the way there he saw men and women in patched and tattered clothes heading for Han's house too.

These people were talking and laughing in groups, so they did not see Goodman Tu slink past with lowered head. When he reached the courtyard, he found the Peasants' Association cadres there distributing goods. People were bustling in and out of the rooms, dividing and selecting things, or crowding round to make suggestions. Some of them were fingering and discussing clothes and materials which they had never seen before. Goodman Tu made a mental note of those who were distributing these things and those who were receiving them. Then he went up to Kuo and said:

"Vice-Chairman Kuo, excuse me, but Team Leader Hsiao sent me here."

"What is it?" Kuo looked up, remembering that this man had recently invited Han's family to live in his house. "What do you want now?" he demanded.

"I've come to offer land," Tu muttered.

"We don't handle such matters here," said Kuo, going on sorting out clothes as he spoke. Tu grinned and walked slowly off, thinking to himself: "Well, they're all difficult to deal with. We'll see! How long can you give yourself airs like that?"

He hurried home to consult with his wife, and see whether all their valuables were safely buried or not. That night, when there was no starlight or moon, he smuggled his valuables out of the village and deposited them with poor relatives elsewhere. He worried too lest the horses he had hidden with other people and the grain he had stored underground might be discovered. He divided his title deeds into two batches and wrapped them in oil paper together with lists of names of the cadres of the Peasants' Association he had made. He buried one batch under a plum tree, making a cut on the trunk of the tree as a secret sign; he hid the other batch under the mat of his *kang*.

But in the daytime, when he met the cadres of the Peasants' Association in the street, he bowed, smiled, and offered to give up his land, declaring: "I swear by the sun, I'm absolutely sincere in this."

One night, he called on Kuo, and declared again his wish to join the Association:

"I'll give up my land and serve the Peasants' Association wholeheartedly. I'll join the poor men on the revolutionary road," he promised.

In the Han mansion, Kuo, Pai, Big Li and about twenty other activists had been working three days and nights. They had worked out a scale of three classes and nine grades: for instance, Class 1, Grade 1 comprised the poorest peasants while Class 3, Grade 3 comprised middle peasants. From the basement had been hauled out two hundred and sixty piculs of grain—maize, kaoliang, rice, and wheat—and three hundred soya bean cakes. These provisions were now being distributed to the poor. The rice was partially mouldy and part of the maize was rotten. Chang Ching-hsiang remembered that, that spring, when he had asked Han for a loan of grain the landlord had answered:

"I haven't enough to eat myself."

Now Chang put a handful of the rotten corn to his nose, sniffed at it, and exclaimed:

"Look, folks, how heartless landlords are! Han allowed the grain to rot rather than loan any to the poor!"

On the third day, a distribution was made of cattle, clothes, and other things. Men and women, old and young, were there, talking and laughing as if it were a festival.

The courtyard was littered with clothes, quilts, bedsheets, utensils, of all varieties and colours. It was like the May Fair in the Heavenly Bliss Monastery in Harbin. Little Wang, Liu Sheng, and Team Leader Hsiao had also come to share the fun. They found Old Sun talking excitedly to a cluster of people around him.

"Old Sun," Team Leader Hsiao called to him, "are you telling another story about the bear?"

"Oh, here's Team Leader Hsiao! We're discussing this sable fur coat. They all say that sable fur is one of the treasures of the Northeast, but I think it's nothing to straw, which is useful to anybody. The fur is good only for the rich few. Look at this thing called sable fur," said Old Sun, showing it to Team Leader Hsiao. "What use is it? I can't see any great difference between a sable skin and a dog or cat pelt. If a carter wore this sort of thing and

went driving logs down from the hills, it would have slit all over before he got home in the evening."

"Suppose it's given you, will you take it?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

"Of course. I'd take it and sell it in town, to get the money to buy a good horse." Saying this, Old Sun started to walk round with the team leader to look at the innumerable clothes and other strange objects.

"What an assortment of clothes!" the carter observed. "There are thirty-odd members of the Han family—suppose each had three changes of clothes every day, it would take them three years to wear all these! Just look at this small fox fur coat, even his children had fur coats. And this small sheepskin coat—why, it must be foreign-made."

"From the western section of the Great Wall," someone corrected him laughingly.

"What material is this?" Team Leader Hsiao asked, fingering a dark-coloured woollen length on another pile. Old Sun examined it closely but could not answer, so he said:

"What do you think?"

"Don't you know?" a youngster interposed.

"It's a kind of woollen serge," another man explained.

"Woollen serge!" exclaimed Old Sun. "Well, it's sure to slit. If a carter put it on, it would slit the moment he knocked against a branch."

They passed from one pile of things to another, commenting as they went.

"What's this?" Team Leader Hsiao asked, pointing to a sort of curtain, made of blue woollen material bordered with light blue.

"That's a wagon cover," the carter explained. "Rich men have different covers for the different seasons of the year. This kind is for autumn. The winter cover is made of light blue woollen material padded with cotton—while it's snowing and blowing outside, you feel warm and snug inside the wagon, as snug as at home!"

More villagers clustered round to look at the thick blue cover.

"This blue material was made in the Manchu dynasty," Old Sun declared.

"It's very strong," said a man in a straw-hat.

"This is really good stuff," agreed a man wearing a felt hat with a drooping brim.

"Fine material for a pair of trousers!" commented a bald man.

"Fine for any purpose," added the man in the straw-hat. "The point is, who'll get it?"

Somebody was throwing some trinkets into the lot containing the wagon cover, when Old Sun stopped him, commenting:

"The wagon cover should be enough by itself, it's so useful. Add those to some other lot. For instance, that lot containing a coloured silk jacket as the chief item—what would a peasant woman do with that? She wants something plain and strong, but this fancy material would wear out in no time. Hadn't you better throw in a coarse cloth jacket to make things fair? After all, everybody helped to overthrow Han Number Six."

They came to the pile of shoes.

"We might be in a shoe store," Old Sun exclaimed, looking at the pile of over three hundred pairs of shoes—men's, women's, children's, leather and rubber shoes, rubber boots and boots with fur linings and woollen covers—a stock bigger than that of an ordinary shoe store. "No wonder I have to go about barefoot! All the shoes were hoarded by landlords. Now tell me how you're going to distribute these shoes."

Old Chu, who was in charge of the shoes, answered:

"Whoever wants shoes can have them. Each pair is priced. Shoes are not given by the lot."

"But the clothes go by the lot, don't they?" asked the old carter.

"Yes, and that's because everybody wants clothes of all sizes for different members of the family. As for shoes, some people want them and some don't. Whoever wants them can come for them."

"What do you mean by priced?" Old Sun asked.

"Well," said Old Chu, "if you belong to Class 1, Grade 1, you should get fifty thousand dollars' worth. A lot of clothes is valued at forty thousand dollars. If you take a lot of clothes, you still have ten thousand dollars left, that is to say, you can still get something valued at that sum. You may, if you like, take shoes, skeins of thread, bowls, dishes, pots, pans, ladles, hoes, axes or anything else useful."

"Who thought up this system?"

"Vice-Chairman Kuo."

"Clever fellow. May I have a horse?" the carter asked.

"I think so, but then you can't have clothes."

"Let's go and ask Kuo," said Old Sun, and asked Little Wang, Liu Sheng and Team Leader Hsiao to go with him. Kuo, Pai and Big Li had not gone home for three days and had not had a good sleep for three nights. After settling questions of organization in the Peasants' Association, Chao had also come to help them distribute Han's things. With some thirty-odd new activists, they had had quite a time of it, appraising the goods, making lots, and fixing the prices. But they were all in high spirits, as if it were somebody's wedding. They were delighted to see Old Sun.

"Old Sun, what do you want?" Kuo asked.

"I'll accept whatever you give me," the carter answered, smiling. But his eyes kept straying all the time to the stable.

"All right, then, take this pair of pillows for yourself and your wife. One for each of you—soft as down!" Kuo produced a pair of embroidered pillows from a pile of clothes. Old Sun held the pillows in his hands and narrowed his eyes to look at the embroidery. "Moon, red flowers, pines," he muttered. "Look! Characters, too!" He appealed to Liu Sheng: "Comrade Liu, will you read these characters to me, please."

The characters were embroidered with red thread on the pillow.

"Wish you happiness!" Liu read.

"Ha! Ha!" Old Sun broke into a laugh. "It's a timely greeting to all of us. Naked men given clothes, hungry men given food—of course we're happy! No need for your good wishes. What's on the other pillow?"

"'Beautiful flowers and a full moon.'"

"What's that?" he asked, narrowing his left eye.

"Beautiful flowers are a pair of flowers just blossoming—a full moon is a bright moon hanging overhead," said Liu Sheng, and added smiling: "These pillows suit you all right."

"A pair of blossoming flowers suit me? Well, well, I'm fifty and my wife's forty-nine. Are we beautiful flowers just blossoming?" He struck a comic attitude.

The whole room broke into peals of laughter.

"You old joker!" exclaimed Chao. And Big Li patted Kuo on the shoulder, quoting: "I wish you happiness!"

The only man not to laugh was Old Sun himself. He was like that. He would keep a straight face himself while he set others laughing, and then screw up his eyes and make a face to set them laughing all the more.

"I can't take these two pillows," he said.

"What do you want, then?" Kuo asked, and stopped laughing.

"Something with four legs," he answered, narrowing his eyes once more and looking out at the horses in the stable.

"That's easy," answered Kuo. "Nothing easier. There are plenty of things with four legs. Take that table there and count the legs—one, two, three, four straight legs. There you are!"

"What do I want a table for?" the carter retorted. "I want four legs that can eat and run. I've been driving an old cart all my life, but I've never had a horse of my own."

Kuo stopped joking, and said seriously: "If you want a horse, we'll consider it, and let you know."

By evening all the clothes, three vats of soya bean oil, one vat of lard, and over three hundred catties of salt had all been distributed to more than three hundred families. Thirty-six horses and donkeys had been given to one hundred and forty-four families—every four families sharing one animal, each family owning, so to speak, one leg of an animal. Old Sun, too, had been given one leg of a horse, a brown gelding. It had been decided to have the office of the Peasants' Association in the Han mansion. Kuo, who had no place to live in, was to occupy the inner room. Old Tien had been allotted three small rooms adjoining the east wing as a compensation for the three thatched rooms which Han had seized as a stable. At the same time, about five hundred *mou* of land—which had also been discovered to belong to Han, although he had never mentioned them—had been distributed to different land-poor villagers. Only twenty pigs and eight geese remained. Nobody wanted the geese.

"I wouldn't waste good money on those long-necked things," declared Old Sun.

"We'll give you a few as a gift," said Kuo.

"I wouldn't take them as a gift. They're such great eaters. Poor people can't afford to keep them," he explained.

The twenty pigs defied any attempt at division. Somebody suggested that they should have a feast to celebrate the triumph of the peasants over the landlord. But Chao objected.

"We're the masters now, but we must look ahead," he reasoned. "It's not the time for us poor people to be feasting yet. I think the Peasants' Association should keep the pigs. At the end of the year, when the time comes to sell them, we'll buy horses. At present, we poor villagers have only one leg of a horse each, but later we should have two legs and after New Year all four legs. What do you say?"

"I agree," Kuo was the first to respond.

"So do I," added Old Sun.

"Then, that settles it," Kuo declared. The people who still wanted to eat the pigs kept quiet.

That very night, after the division of the property, Kuo moved into the Han house. Old Tien waited till the next day before moving in.

All the poor villagers—more than three hundred families in all—had received a share of the landlord's goods. They had clothes to wear, quilts for their *kang*, and food to eat. Some households which had not owned a horse for generations now had a leg of a horse. Some people who had never before tasted a drop of oil now had the joy of smelling its aroma as something sizzled in the pan.

The villagers were so overjoyed, some could not eat and others could not sleep for some time.

"Now this is our real emancipation," old women asserted.

"This is true democracy," old men declared.

"We have had wrongs redressed, and have rice and wheat to eat," middle-aged men responded.

"Now we have a new life, we mustn't forget who gave it us," said the village cadres. "'When you drink water, think gratefully of the men who sank the well.'"

"The Communist Party and the United Democratic Army have done so much for us, we must never forget them," said the activists.

There was a new, revolutionary atmosphere in the village, and the peasants were so happy that they could hardly express themselves sufficiently. Chang Ching-hsiang was very happy with his rubber boots. One rainy day several years before, Han, wearing these same rubber boots, had given him three hard kicks for taking

water from his well. Now that Chang had these boots on his own feet, he often burst out singing for joy. Rain or shine, the waterproof boots never left his feet. On sunny days, he swaggered about in them, to show them off. On wet days, he walked straight into puddles and went paddling about. If he inadvertently splashed a passer-by, he would wipe the mud off the man's leg with his own sleeve.

His neighbour Hua Yung-hsi had been given a woman's fur coat. When he called on neighbours and friends to congratulate them, they crowded round to comment on his fur coat.

"A real thing from the west region," said one.

"A timely gift for the coming winter," added another.

"Isn't it just?" Chang put in. "How soft and warm—snow melts at the touch of it!"

"The pity is that it's a woman's fur coat."

"Marry a woman and put it on her," proposed someone else.

"Or just find someone to live with," suggested a man named Wu. He himself had picked up a widow, who had brought with her a boy old enough to do odd jobs. He therefore recommended this proposition as doubly profitable. Because the neighbours laughed at him, he wanted Hua to follow his example in order to share the ridicule.

At night the neighbours dispersed and forgot about the business. But Hua went home, pondering the proposition. He slept badly during the night. He was getting on for forty, and now society had changed; he felt he ought to have a wife and family. But where was the money to come from? Suppose he could sell his fur coat and fetch a tidy sum? But then who would marry him? There was no suitable girl in the village. Suddenly a woman flashed across his mind—Mrs. Chang, the widow who had accused Han Number Six at the mass meeting. She was about thirty-six, and not bad-looking. "All right, that settles it," he told himself, as if provided he was willing, the widow could raise no objection. He fell asleep at midnight. He got up at dawn and, without stopping to breakfast, set out to find the widow. When he was approaching her shack, he got funky, thinking: "What if she asks what my business is?" His face flushed, his heart pounding, he wanted to turn tail. But it was too late. The widow had seen him.

"Brother Hua, come on in!" Mrs. Chang called, popping her head out at the window. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, I have," he fibbed.

"What an early breakfast! Where were you going just now, so early in the morning?" she asked with a grin as she went on sewing a quilt.

"I—I was going to the Peasants' Association to have a conference with Chairman Chao," Hua added one lie to another.

"How busy you are!" the widow exclaimed, casting a sidelong glance at him.

"Oh, yes, I've been busy the last few days; Chairman Chao often asked my opinion, and I said I agreed. . . ." Hua stopped short, unable to go on. He was flushed again. After an awkward silence, he hit upon a remark:

"Have you fixed up your *kang*?"

"No, not yet. I've not been able to find a helping hand," the widow answered, bending down her head to the sewing.

"I'll do it for you," Hua proffered, with the eagerness of a drowning man clutching at a straw.

"How kind of you! I was just worrying about getting help. When do you think you can come?"

"Any time you say."

Hua took leave of the widow and walked home a blissful man. Soon after, they fell to talking heart to heart. They discussed how they could cut the fuel expense by half if they lived together. She had been given a quilt which had a cover of red satin with a piece of blue satin let into it. To protect the good material, she had sewn an old sheet over the quilt—this was the task Hua had seen her at that day. After she had decided to share one *kang* with him, she undid her sewing and exposed the red satin again.

The news of Hua's relationship to the widow soon spread through the whole village. The first man to know about them was Old Chu, who lived in the west wing in the same courtyard with Mrs. Chang. Old Chu told a good friend of his, enjoining him: "This is just between you and me!" That friend had his own good friend who was also entitled to the same news and the same secrecy—who told a friend of his. So the secret travelled apace, but the last man to know it was still telling his friend:

"This is strictly confidential!"

Now, how had Old Chu, the first man, come to know that secret? One day, about midnight, when he got up to give his horse mash, he overheard a man's voice in the widow's room, and presently saw Hua emerge from the darkness!

Old Chu was also a poor peasant. During the fishing season he lived in a shed on the river bank. He had never before owned a horse, but now he was one of four owners of a chestnut coloured horse. It was a six-year-old, pulling a good weight. The three other owners had agreed to let Old Chu keep it in his place. The day that Old Chu led home the horse, he and his wife could not sleep for joy.

"Why aren't you asleep?" Old Chu asked her.

"Why aren't you?" she retorted. "Listen! He has stopped chewing! Maybe there's no more mash in the trough. You had better get up and see about it."

Old Chu got up, throwing a sack around his waist, and his wife followed him, covering her breasts with another sack. Both had been given clothes, but they wanted to keep rather than wear them. They lighted a torch and found the trough empty. Old Chu poured into it a basketful of fresh grass and his wife added a ladleful of chaff. Then they remained standing near the horse and took great delight in watching him.

"This horse originally belonged to Old Ku," Old Chu said to his wife. "In 1941, Old Ku rented fifty *mou* of land from Han. The crop failed because of a flood, but the poor fellow had to pay the landlord the rent all the same—and paid it with his horse, this one. This time, Chairman Chao offered to give the horse back to its rightful owner, but Ku refused it."

"Why?"

"Old Ku is superstitious. He said: 'I don't want my own horse back. As the saying goes, a good horse doesn't turn back to eat grass.'"

"Then, why did you bring him home, you old fool?"

"Who's the old fool, you or me? Old Ku is superstitious. Does that mean I should be superstitious too and give up such a good horse? Just look at him—small mouth, good muscles, fine straight legs sleek and strong!"

"You've only one of the legs. What are you so pleased about?" As a matter of fact, she was quite satisfied, and she liked her

husband the better because of the horse. Back on the *kang*, she continued to listen to the horse chewing, as if it was the best music in the world, and she nudged him now and then, saying:

"Listen! He's chewing well!"

In the village there was another old couple who could not sleep for joy. Old Tien and his wife had moved into their new quarters and been given fifteen *mou* of land close to their daughter's burial-ground. The next afternoon, Old Tien was going to stake the boundary of the land, and his blind wife insisted upon going with him to see what the farm was like. Old Tien led her by the hand until they had passed the North Gate and reached the place by the river. He stopped and she asked: "Is it here, the land?"

"Yes, here," he answered. The blind woman squatted down to pat one of the ridges. She stroked a corn-cob, picked up a clod of sandy black earth, and crumbled it lovingly in the palm of her hand, letting the soil run out between her fingers. A smile appeared on her face. It was their own land now. The like of this had never happened to any of their ancestors. If they had had land of their own earlier, their daughter would not have died.

"Who'll have the crop this year?" the old woman asked.

"The crop goes with the land," said Old Tien. The sun was setting and the evening wind was whistling through the maize and kaoliang stalks. The kaoliang had changed from golden to red, and the stems of the corn were withering. It would soon be dark, but she sat there on the ground, not wanting to leave.

"It's getting late. Let's go home," Old Tien urged.

"You go home first. I want to see our girl's grave," she said. "Our girl wouldn't have died, if we had had our own land earlier," she repeated as she wiped her tears with her sleeve.

"Come home quickly! See! Clouds are gathering in the southwest, and a big rain is coming on! If we don't go quickly, we'll get soaked." Old Tien tricked her into leaving, lest she should go and cry over her daughter's grave for a long time.

At the North Gate, they met Old Sun driving towards the west.

"Where have you been to?" he asked, smiling.

"To our new land," Old Tien answered.

"Get on my cart," the old carter stopped, and they clambered up onto the cart. As the horse broke into a gallop, he exclaimed: "Look at this brown gelding! How he runs!"

"Not bad. How old is he?" Old Tien asked.

"Eight years. I was given one of his legs. Big Li got another. I reasoned with Big Li: 'You're a blacksmith. What do you want a quarter of a horse for? You're busy enough shoeing horses for the whole village; what time do you have to feed a horse? Give me your leg. You're an officer of the Peasants' Association, and you ought to set a good example.' Big Li said: 'Old Sun, take it if you want it.' I thanked him and said: 'You're a good worker, you really are, and Old Sun will never fail to support a good officer like you. You'll always be shoeing my horse, too.' So I now own two legs instead of one. Look! All his feet are off the ground! It's true that a good horse is judged by his skin and hoofs."

"Where are you going?" Old Tien asked.

"To the North Compound. It's not called the Han mansion any more, but the North Compound," the carter replied. "Vice-Chairman Kuo didn't give himself a share of the confiscated food-stuffs, and he's short of food. I'm sending him something. Wo! Wo!" He got clear of a puddle and resumed: "Do you know the little swineherd has come back from hospital? His wounds have healed. The Eighth Route Army doctors are wonderful. They are better than Hua To.¹ The swineherd was in a bad way, yet they did the trick."

"He has no parents. Where is he living now, that poor boy?" Old Tien's blind wife asked. Old Sun was glad to have something more to talk about. "Vice-Chairman Kuo said: 'Let the swineherd live with me.' But Chairman Chao objected: 'No, how could you look after a boy? You're a bachelor. Taking care of a child is no joke—feeding and clothing him and all that. Let my wife take care of him. As long as we have something to eat, we won't let him starve.' Wo! Wo!" Old Sun pulled his horse to a stop—at the black gate of the former Han house. He jumped down, slung a bag of grain over his shoulder, and hobbled to where Kuo lived inside the compound. When he came out again, the blind woman gave him a basketful of potatoes to take to the little swineherd. She had a great deal of sympathy for this boy who had nearly been flogged to death by Han Number Six, like her own daughter before him. Old

¹ A famous surgeon of the Three Kingdoms period in the third century.

Sun drove off with her gift. On the way, he met Pai, who appeared with a swollen left eye!

"What's the matter with your eye?" the carter asked in surprise, reining in his horse.

"It's thanks to that backward element!" Pai halted before the cart and explained how his wife had quarrelled with him. Pai had been given ten *mou* of land near his house, and someone had complained:

"The cadres have done twice as well as the rest of us out of land distribution."

Big Li had overheard this and told Pai, who, thereupon, changed his land for another piece located far away from his house, in order to allay the misgivings of the villagers. Conscious that he had done right, he cheerfully told his wife about the exchange. She paused in her sewing, and knitted her beautiful black brows.

"You have made a fool of yourself!" she exclaimed. "You've thrown away a piece of meat and taken a bone! I've suffered half of my life with you, and shall have yet to suffer the other half, I suppose."

"An officer of the Peasants' Association ought to set a good example," Pai explained.

"Example or no example, you must eat and live. You're fool enough to have given up good land for land which even hares wouldn't live on, and I'd like to know how you mean to manage."

"Don't worry. You won't starve!" he retorted, a little angry.

"I'm going to the Peasants' Association to claim back my land," she declared, slipping off the *kang*. Pai tried to hold her back by the arm, and a tussle ensued. She had in her hand the frame on which she was sewing, and gave him a crack over the eye with it. Seeing his eye bleeding, she quieted down, half frightened, half remorseful. She sat down on the *kang*, moping, undecided whether she should wipe the cut for him or not. Pai bolted and, at the door, muttered: "Backward element."

When Old Sun heard this, he cracked his whip, and said with a smile:

"All women are the same. You can hardly expect them to think straight all at once. You ought to enlighten her instead of quarrelling with her. Don't let the capitalists have the laugh of us poor men." The carter had lately picked up a lot of new political terms

like "enlighten" and "capitalist" from the work team and the Peasants' Association and was in the habit of flaunting them whenever possible. While saying this, he was thinking to himself: "I wouldn't have done such a thing in his place."

When Old Sun got to Chao's shack, he delivered the potatoes from Mrs. Tien to the little swineherd who was having lunch with the Chao family.

"Sit down and have lunch with us," Mrs. Chao invited the carter. "Son, fetch chopsticks and a bowl."

"I've had lunch," he said. "Don't trouble." He took a glance at the food on the table—salted beans, raw leaves of cabbage, two raw chillies, bran gruel.

"You're chairman of the Peasants' Association. In our village, what you say goes. Yet look what you and your family feed on! Still eating gruel! You might have some steamed bread for a change," he advised.

"What have you heard in the village?" Chao asked, brushing aside Old Sun's concern for his family diet. "Are they satisfied? Are those clothes enough to tide them over the coming winter?"

"The villagers have only one complaint to make, and that's that you have given yourself too little. They all ask: 'Isn't Old Chao a poor man like us? Why, then, doesn't he deserve equal treatment?' I say to them: In the puppet Manchukuo time, we were both alike, both as poor as hell. The nickname you had then, Chairman Chao, wasn't a beautiful title at all. Now the poor people have come to the top, and you run things in our village, yet you deny yourself everything. Your boy and your wife are still as poor as before. That's going too far. The capitalists will laugh at us up their sleeves, and say that the four hundred families in this village can't even give the chairman of their Peasants' Association a decent living."

Everybody in the room laughed.

"Good Old Sun, don't you see that we all have clothes on now?" Chao answered, dipping a cabbage leaf in the sauce. Old Sun chatted a little longer, then left.

Mrs. Chao and the boy each had an old jacket on. Chao had put himself down as Class 3, Grade 3, and accordingly received a share of paltry things. Seeing her neighbours returning laden with

bolts of new cloth and bundles of new clothes, his wife felt rather upset. That evening, she said mildly:

"They say that we should belong to Class 1, Grade 1, and should have got better things than these rags, which will be no use for winter wear."

"If we have clothes to wear, that's good enough. Under the puppet regime we were naked, but still managed to get by," Chao replied. His wife, a meek and tenderhearted woman, had for years endured all hardships and privations with him without complaint. During the puppet Manchukuo time, she had not had a rag to put on and had often gone down to the fields naked. But because she loved her husband, she accepted poverty without a murmur. Now her husband was chairman of the Peasants' Association. She was not clear what a chairman was, but she knew it meant that he got up in the small hours, went out to serve the people, and came home late. He had not even the time to fetch water for her. A short while ago, he had spent a whole day collecting firewood and stacking it up on the river bank, only to have it set on fire by somebody. Although her life had not improved, she felt no resentment. She loved her husband because he was capable and honest—he was her heaven, her life and all. When he said: "If we have clothes to wear, that's good enough," she felt satisfied. Chao was happy because things were going well in the Peasants' Association, and he felt his wife was pure gold. He tried to comfort her by saying:

"There's no hurry. When everybody has more to wear, we shall have more too."

He felt sorry to have to put the whole burden of domestic chores on her. She had been hard put to it to borrow fuel from the neighbours for some time already. He decided to go again the following day to the wood for fuel, but he was going to borrow a horse and cart the firewood home without delay this time.

XIX

EARLY the next morning after Chao had carted home a load of fuel, he was watering three horses, when Liu Teh-shan ran up to him and gasped in alarm:

"So you're here, watering horses!"

"What of it?" Chao asked.

"The bandits are coming! Han's younger brother has already reached Sanchia with more than one hundred men, all armed with guns, and all dressed in white in mourning for Han Number Six. They declare they'll avenge his death. The villagers are falling into a panic. Yet here you are watering your horses!" Liu then left hastily, while Chao vaulted upon a horse and galloped home taking the other two horses in tow. He left the horses there, snatched his rifle, and ran on to the schoolhouse. There he found Team Leader Hsiao putting through a telephone call, at the same time ordering Section Leader Chang to dispatch two able scouts to reconnoitre the road leading to Sanchia.

"You've come at the right moment," Team Leader Hsiao said to Chao, with the receiver to his ear. "Go and tell the villagers to keep calm. As long as we don't panic, not even a thousand bandits can take our village. Eh! It's not working!" He put back the receiver and rang again.

Chao ran through the village. He saw some villagers harnessing horses to carts, some running about with baggage-rolls. He shouted from house to house:

"Neighbours, don't run about. Don't get panicky. The bandits have no chance. What are you afraid of? Team Leader Hsiao is ringing up the county Party committee. The Eighth Route Army is coming." When people saw that he was not running away, but was actually coming to reassure them, they calmed down and some of them went back home.

"Neighbours, get your spears and muskets ready and join the work team in defending the village," he cried at the top of his voice.

Team Leader Hsiao could not get his call through. He threw the receiver to the table, and said: "The line has been cut." He began pacing the floor, puckering his brows. Then, he muttered to himself: "Yes, that's the idea!" and called aloud:

"Section Leader Chang, ride quickly to the county seat for reinforcements. Borrow a horse and see you make the thirty miles there and back within eight hours."

He pulled out a pocket-book, tore off a leaf, took the pen from Liu Sheng's coat pocket, and scribbled:

"To the county Party committee:—Urgent. Bandits at

Sanchia, about fifty, all armed and on horseback. Send down a company at once. Hsiao. September 3."

Section Leader Chang was off with the message. People came to see the work team in threes and fours, some to seek advice, some to get news. Pai came in, holding his rifle, and sat down by the door.

"Heard about the bandits?" Team Leader Hsiao asked him.

"I'm ready for them," Pai answered.

"How?"

"We'll fight with them with what we have—our rifles, muskets, spears and our old cannon are all ready."

"Suppose we can't beat them off?"

"Retreat."

"Suppose our retreat is cut off?"

"Then, we'll fight it out. They're men like us—why be afraid of them?" Saying this, Pai stood up.

"Right! You lead one half of the militiamen and remain inside the village wall. Take this rifle and pass it on to Chang Ching-hsiang. Let him be vice head. This place is easy to hold with the earthen wall and the defence works erected by the Third Battalion. Move the old cannon to the inner side of the ditch outside the South Gate, and you yourself cover it with your gun. Close the East, West and North Gates and send some militiamen to defend them with muskets. Chang will patrol the streets with two other men. If it should be necessary to fall back, retreat into the North Compound. All the civilians will keep inside the courtyard and rooms, while the armed men will keep watch in the turrets. This way I think we can hold the village for one month, let alone three or four days. Mind you, each family must bring with them food enough to last for about a week if they retreat into the North Compound."

"Team Leader, how about you?" Pai asked. "Are you evacuating the village?"

"Team Leader Hsiao, if you evacuate, I'll drive you out on my cart," timid Old Sun offered hastily. "Let Old Pai take over the village from you." Without answering the carter, Hsiao said to Big Li in a low voice:

"Watch the landlords and their stooges, and those gang leaders who refused to give up. Put them under house arrest. If anybody should move, you've my orders to shoot to kill."

Pai, Big Li, Chang and the others charged with defending the village went to carry out their respective orders. Team Leader Hsiao belted on his revolver, and strode out of the schoolhouse towards the South Gate followed by Wan, Little Wang, and Liu Sheng—all armed with automatics. The guards came next, their bayonets glittering in the golden sunlight. Chao, and a big crowd brought up the rear, armed with all sorts of weapons—muskets, spears, axes, hoes and sticks. One man was carrying aloft a red flag inscribed with the words "Peasants' Association of Yuanmao Village." This red flag was made of a piece of silk which Chao had picked up in the Han mansion, and onto which his wife had sewn white cloth characters. Seeing this red flag, Team Leader Hsiao called out quickly:

"Leave the flag behind—don't take it with you!"

So the red flag left the procession and was planted on the top of the village wall by the South Gate, where it fluttered in the breeze, displaying the big characters in white.

Leaving the South Gate behind, Hsiao and the others crossed a wooden bridge over a wide ditch and took the highway, marching three or four abreast. The maize had grown higher than their heads on both sides of the road. Two scouts went ahead with rifles, searching the fields and clearing the way.

"Hurry up," Hsiao turned around and shouted, waving his hand, urging on those men lagging behind. "We must make haste to take one of those two hillocks over there."

Scarcely had he finished when two shots were heard in front, and then the bandits' rifles rang out. Cocking an ear, the team leader declared:

"They're still some distance away—nearly half a mile. That's a Japanese-made rifle, that's an automatic."

Some gun-shy villagers were lying flat on the ground. He called to them:

"Come on! Get up and follow me. It's nothing."

Bang! came a shot from a nearby maize field, whistling low and heavy.

"Disperse, quick!" Hsiao cried. "Lie down!" But he remained standing himself, and a bullet grazed his right hand.

"Are you hurt?" Little Wang and Liu Sheng ran up and asked.

Little Wang quickly tore a strip off his shirt and bandaged the leader's bleeding hand.

"Is it serious?" demanded Chao and Kuo, hurrying up.

"Nothing much—only a scratch," Hsiao answered. "You lie down, quick." Before he had finished, a bullet hit the butt of Chao's rifle. Enraged, he straightened up instead of lying down, cursed, opened fire, and ran forward in the direction where the bullet had come from with his levelled gun. The men behind saw him run up a slope planted with maize, then throw out his arms and fall on his back! He lay with his head hanging limply over a ridge of the field. His hat had fallen off, he had crushed two corn plants in his fall, but he was clutching the barrel of the gun tight in his right hand. The blue cloth jacket, which had been his share in the distribution of clothes, was wet with blood.

"Where's he hit?" Team Leader Hsiao ran over and squatted down by Chao. His right arm was in a sling, but he managed with his left to lift Chao's head onto the ridge. Telling his orderly to bandage the wound and, if necessary, send Chao to the county hospital, Hsiao stood up and, holding the automatic in his left hand, fired a round in the direction where the bullet had come from. While the enemy fire was momentarily silenced, he charged on with his men. Kuo came up to Chao and kneeled on one knee before him.

"Chairman Chao!" The sight of the wounded man's ashy face brought a lump to Kuo's throat, and he could say no more. Chao opened his eyes and gasped:

"Go and fight them. Use my gun. Leave me alone." His eyes closed weakly.

The firing became more and more intensive, and bullets whistled past, spattering earth over the wounded man.

"You others go," said Wan. "Just one of you stay to help me take care of him."

Kuo, with tears in his eyes, told Old Chu to stay behind with the orderly. Then he stroked Chao's arm, took his gun, and was about to go off, when Wan said:

"Cartridges."

Kuo took the cartridge belt off Chao and slung it across his own shoulder. The faded green cloth belt was sticky with blood.

"Kuo caught up with the militiamen, and together with Team

Leader Hsiao charged on. About a thousand villagers had rushed out too, shouting. When the shouting and the rustling of leaves was fainter, Chao stopped clenching his teeth, and began to groan: "Aiyoh!—yah!"

Wan unbuttoned his coat. A bullet had penetrated the right side of Chao's belly, his wound as big as a winecup.

"Give me another bullet," he pleaded.

"You'll get well," Wan answered. His eyes filled with tears, as he tried to stop the wound. He told Old Chu to try to get a cart to take Chao to the county hospital.

"Just quickly finish me off." He groaned.

"You'll get well. We're sending you to the hospital." The firing became intermittent, indicating that the bandits were beginning to weaken. Team Leader Hsiao and his men had by now occupied a hillock from which they could see the bandits sprawling here and there in the furrows amid kaoliang and maize stalks.

While holding the attackers off, the land reform workers and armed guards found time to pile bricks and stones around themselves in the form of a small bulwark. Hsiao told some of the militiamen to dig trenches with their hoes and spears, and directed the men to prepare for prolonged battle.

The bandits were up charging again. They got as far as the foot of the hillock, when at a signal given by Team Leader Hsiao the defenders concentrated their fire on the first men climbing up the slope. Two of them were hit. As they threw down their rifles and crumpled up, the rest fled.

After a while the bandits tried again. This time, instead of attempting a massed frontal attack, they made a left flanking movement by filtering by twos and threes through the corn and kaoliang stalks till they were near the stone rampart.

"Brother, you had better take a rest," Hua Yung-hsi said to a young armed guard, whose right hand had been wounded. He put away his musket and, running forward, picked up an enemy rifle and took a cartridge belt off a dead bandit. Just then a bullet set his straw-hat flying. He dropped down, placing the rifle on a boulder, and told his companions in a whisper:

"Don't move!" Then he closed his left eye, and leaned his right cheek against the gun, but did not pull the trigger. The bandits advanced nearer and nearer, yet still Hua lay quiet.

"Bastard, why don't you fire? You spy!" In spite of the pain in his wounded right hand, the young guard tried to pull the trigger; but the rifle did not fire because there was no cartridge in it. Raising his head, he was worried to see Hua holding his rifle without firing at the bandits. He dashed forward and, cursing Hua, he was about to strike him with the rifle-butt.

"No hurry. Just watch."

Hua pulled the trigger, and one of the foremost bandits fell. Bang went the gun again, and another bandit dropped. At his third shot, the bandits in front fled in confusion, while those behind wavered for a moment then turned tail too.

"What's your name?" the young guard asked, grasping his hand.

"Hua, also known as Crack Shot," somebody answered for him. "We'll soon drink his wedding wine!"

"Don't listen to him!" retorted Hua, smiling, the rifle still in his hand.

Team Leader Hsiao ordered them all to count their cartridges. The young guard did not have a single cartridge, while the others had very few left. Some had a dozen or so, some only two or three. All 65 m.m. cartridges were collected and given to Kuo, who was using the rifle taken over from Chao. All 79 m.m. cartridges were given to Hua, who continued to use the rifle taken from the enemy. Hua stayed in front to fire at the bandits, while the others were told to be ready to charge with bayonets in case reinforcements should fail to come after all the cartridges had run out. After Hsiao had made these arrangements, he called Kuo over and gave him orders. In another minute Kuo and another armed guard, Old Chin, could be seen crawling down the furrows to the kaoliang field fringing the hillock and then disappearing into the thicket.

Suddenly, in the distance, beyond the enemy's left flank, shots were heard, which seemed to be taking the bandits by surprise and causing confusion. The bandits feared that reinforcements had come from the county seat, and began to concentrate their fire on this new enemy which threatened their rear, leaving only a few men to deal with this side.

"They're shifting the position of their main force," Team Leader Hsiao observed with a smile, turning on his side on the ground. He laid down his automatic and pulled out a piece of paper and

a deer-skin tobacco pouch. As he was rolling a cigarette, he asked Hua:

"Can you hold out till dark, with this scanty supply of cartridges?"

"I think so," said Hua.

"Where did you pick up your marksmanship?"

"As a child I went on hunting trips and learned how to use a gun," Hua answered. "If we had enough cartridges, we could easily finish all the bandits today." He levelled his gun again, but did not fire.

"When Old Hua goes hunting in winter, they say he can hit two roebucks with one bullet," somebody threw in.

"To bag a roebuck is easy enough, but a deer is difficult. A deer is so fast, as soon as it hears your steps it makes off like the wind, and even a bullet can't overtake it."

"The bear is equally difficult, isn't it?" asked Hsiao, puffing at his cigarette.

"Yes and no, depending upon whether you know his habits. If you fail to get him with the first shot, you must step quickly aside; for, he's going directly for you. You'll be done for, if you refuse to budge. To kill a bear, you must be clever and bold. The black bulky thing is even terrible to look at."

As evening set in, the bandits concentrated their fire on this side again, as if they had discovered that the attack behind them was merely a feint. Now they were making a determined assault, bullets whistling overhead in a shower. One pierced Team Leader Hsiao's cap, whisking off a lock of his hair but causing a mere scratch on his head. Hua remained quite calm. No sooner did a head stick out from among the kaoliang stalks, when bang! Hua fired, and got his man.

"The bastards are going to charge again," Hua turned to speak to Hsiao.

"We'll give them a counter-attack. Come on, brothers! Follow me!" As Team Leader Hsiao called the rest, he and Hua were already dashing out of their defence works down the slope.

"Kill them!" bellowed Hua. And added: "Don't be afraid, in a revolution we mustn't be afraid of dying. Kill bandit Han, then we shall have peace!" As he shouted, he fired. Team Leader Hsiao also fired a round. Two more of the bandits fell. The men behind

hurried after Hsiao, and those who had only spears in their hands picked up rifles and cartridges from the dead bandits to arm themselves. In this counter-attack, they picked up four rifles and many cartridges. Hua no longer had to use his cartridges sparingly, but fired round after round, aiming not at the enemies' heads but at their bodies which were easier to hit. In the charge, he got five out of every ten.

"Long-neck Han!" A happy shout went up when the Long-neck was discovered among the dead left by the enemy. By running away, this henchman of Han had given the villagers cause for anxiety; but now this was dispelled. They had one enemy the less. Those behind crowded round, talking excitedly, forgetting there was still fierce fighting going on.

"It serves him right!"

"He's got what he deserved!"

"Dead, and his neck is longer than ever."

"Why frown? You're sorry, aren't you? But we can't allow you to be happy. If we allowed that, we'd all be dead. You'd better run and catch up with your master Han Number Six and be his stooge in hell." Someone had a leisurely conversation with Long-neck, as if he could still hear it.

Meanwhile, the bandits were showing signs of confusion. In the thick rifle fire distant machine guns could be heard rattling. Hsiao listened and discerned one heavy and one light machine gun. Little Wang jumped up and boomed:

"Comrades, it's our reinforcements arriving! The bandits have no machine guns. Let's charge! Onward, comrades! Kill them!" Little Wang started jumping up and down excitedly, regardless of the hail of bullets, firing his automatic ceaselessly.

"Charge!" Liu Sheng was firing too. Because he was sweating, his eyeglasses were misted over, and he wiped them with his left hand, while holding the automatic in his right hand. Then, he ran onward, shouting "Charge!" Hsiao and Hua were fighting mad, their eyes bloodshot. Everybody had the same thought, the same aim: wipe out the bandits and landlords completely!

Meanwhile, as they were charging and shouting, some distance away, amid brown kaoliang sheaves and green maize leaves, there appeared khaki-clad men wearing armbands identifying them as

belonging to the United Democratic Army! One of them was waving, gun in hand, as he called to this side:

"Comrades, cease firing! Don't waste your fire! We're throwing a cordon around them, and we want to take them alive."

"Can we take them alive?" Hua shouted back.

"Sure thing! This is how we deal with bandits. None of them will escape, I give you my word for it."

The villagers and militiamen stopped firing, and the bandits were forced back into a swampy field.

There the bandits one after another went down on their knees in the mud and held their guns over their heads, begging for mercy. As the man in khaki led a group out from the kaoliang fields, the villagers clapped their hands, hugging their spears against their chests. One of them, shading his eyes against the slanting evening sun, called out:

"Say, there must be about a thousand of them!"

"No, not more than one company at most," another interposed.

The bandits were disarmed and tied up. Out of fifty-odd bandits, thirty-seven had been taken prisoner. The rest were probably all dead. Company Commander Ma who had led the troops to round up the bandits was a stout man with a rectangular face and bushy, black eyebrows. Team Leader Hsiao went forward and grasped his hand. They were old friends.

"We got your dispatch at noon," said Company Commander Ma. "Section Leader Chang suggested that we make for Yuanmao for fear the bandits might have already broken into the village. I thought it would be better to come to Sanchia first and then, if necessary, advance northward to Yuanmao. I guessed right this time—I figured you could hold out."

"Shall we take the prisoners to Yuanmao?" Team Leader Hsiao asked, smiling.

"No. They should be taken to the county seat. And some of them'll be sent on to Yimienpo, for the people there to see what live bandits look like."

"Anyway, you must let us keep Han's younger brother, Han Number Seven. The people of Yuanmao want him. The others you can take away. Who will identify him? We're going to take him back." Thereupon, several villagers dashed off to look for

Han Number Seven. After scanning the whole group, someone cried out:

"He must have escaped! He isn't here!"

"Escaped?" There were cries of dismay.

"What's the use of these small fry?" exclaimed Hua. "The big fish has got out of the net!"

"The tiger is back in its den, and Yuanmao is still in danger," a man in a straw-hat pronounced, looking as if he thought Company Commander Ma to blame.

"Take him alive! I knew it wouldn't be easy. The land is so wide. He can hide himself in the fields, and a thousand men won't be able to find him."

"I've never seen a more cunning fowl than the pheasant, a more cunning animal than the fox, and a more cunning man than Han Number Seven," declared a third.

"He's a devil," put in Hua. "Last May when they came to the village, he strutted about with an automatic accompanied by two bandits shouldering rifles and carrying sticks. In the daytime they kept watch, and at night he went from house to house plundering. He took everything from the cupboards and boxes. He yanked off the women's clothes and made them stand there naked while he had a good look."

"He played havoc with every household. He seized over one hundred horses, not to mention other things," the man in a straw-hat said.

"He set more than thirty houses on fire."

"He snatched Old Ku's daughter-in-law. She was found later."

"What unit did he belong to?" Team Leader Hsiao asked.

"The third army of the 'Central Vanguard' of the Kuomintang government. Something of the sort, I don't remember exactly." Hua answered.

"If we catch him alive, we'll tear him to pieces," the man in a straw-hat proposed, remembering how Han's brother had taken his horse.

Company Commander Ma was rather upset. He wondered how the bandit chief could have got through such a tight cordon. It suddenly occurred to him that he might have been killed, and he told Hsiao:

"It's possible that Han Number Seven was killed. Anyway,

I'm going to ask those bastards once more. Meanwhile, you look for him among the dead." The company commander cross-examined the captives. Some said that Han Number Seven had escaped, some thought that he had been killed, some simply trembled for fear and said not a word. Team Leader Hsiao told Hua and the man in a straw-hat to go and look for the bandit chief among the corpses. In the kaoliang and maize fields, among the clumps of weeds, lay some dozen dead bandits whose rifles and cartridges had been taken away. Among them were Long-neck Han and Han's bodyguard Li Ching-shan. But where was Han Number Seven?

"Here he is!" Hua exclaimed.

"Where?" several voices asked in chorus.

"Here!" answered Hua from the hazel shrubs at the end of a big patch of red kaoliang, where the leaves were rustling. They were rushing forward triumphantly, when bang! Hua fired.

"Hi, what's that? Isn't he dead?" shouted the man in a straw-hat, running ahead of the others.

"He's dead," said Hua. "I give him an extra bullet to make sure he wouldn't run away."

"If he's dead, how could he run away?" one man asked, and the others laughed. They squeezed through the hazel grove and were not reassured until they saw Han Number Seven lying on the grass, face up, limbs outstretched.

More and more villagers squeezed through, trampling down the hazel shrubs. Everybody was doubly happy at the victory over the bandits and the death of the bandit chief. Some gathered wild berries, some nibbled at wild apples, some gnawed at barren maize stalks juicy like sugar-canes. But the greatest attraction was the bandit chief. They wanted to see with their own eyes that this was really the end of him.

"Are you really Han Number Seven?" somebody asked the corpse. "Why aren't you robbing people again?"

"Why aren't you tugging at women's trousers?"

"Why aren't you stealing horses?"

"Why aren't you burning houses?"

"Do you remember how many people you killed? In three days at the Dragon-boat Festival, you killed so many people and ruined so many families."

"Your brother Han Number Six has gone before you. Go and overtake him and cross the river to hell with him too!"

The villagers then walked slowly away. They crossed the fields till they came to where Team Leader Hsiao and Company Commander Ma were sitting on the grass with the company secretary counting the booty—thirty-six rifles, one automatic, and one Mauser which had been used by the bandit chief. This last was given to Company Commander Ma as a souvenir. Twelve of the rifles with cartridges went to arm the militiamen. The rest were to be carted away to the county government.

Hua and the other villagers were grateful to Company Commander Ma for his service, and ashamed that they had nearly blamed him for the bandit chief's disappearance earlier.

"Company Commander Ma, stay with us for one or two days," one villager invited him.

"Comrade Ma, bring all your men to our village. We haven't got much that's good, but there's plenty of fresh maize."

"Thank you all, but I'm afraid we must go back to the county seat tonight. It's only about ten miles away, so we'll not go to your village."

"How can you do that? You've saved us from the bandits, and yet you refuse so much as a cup of water from us. You want to go away at once. No! No!" exclaimed an old man, grasping Company Commander Ma by the arm.

"If he refuses to be our guest, that means he looks down upon us," said another.

They began to throw a cordon around the company commander and his men. Some took hold of Ma. Some started tugging other members of the company. Seeing this, Team Leader Hsiao, Liu Sheng and Little Wang stepped forward and explained that the soldiers had their regular duties too, which they must not neglect in order to accept an invitation.

Then the villagers let go of Company Commander Ma, and made way for him and his men.

"Let's gather corn-cobs, hazel-nuts, and wild berries to give our troops! What do you say?" cried Hua.

"Right!" hundreds of villagers echoed.

"Whose field is this?" Hua asked.

"Never mind about that. We can settle with the owner later on," answered a voice in the field.

They scattered in the fields and thickets, and in less than no time gathered over three hundred corn-cobs, berries, wild pears and hazel-nuts. The troops were already some distance away, but the villagers ran after them and rammed these presents into their pockets.

Then the work team and the officers of the Peasants' Association, leaving behind some twenty people to bury the dead bandits, started back to the village with the rest. The sun was setting, and red clouds in the western sky glowed like fire. Amid the brown kaoliang sheaves and green maize leaves the spears the men carried aloft glittered in the slanting sun. They chatted as they walked about the newly won rifles, the bandits killed, and other events of the day. Someone behind broke into song:

*Without the Communist Party,
How could we have the new China?*

Team Leader Hsiao who was walking in front suddenly looked back and saw that Old Chin was missing.

"Has anybody seen Kuo and Old Chin?" he asked.

"No," replied Hua. Then he in turn asked those behind: "Is Vice-Chairman Kuo there? The team leader wants him." But nobody had seen them. Consternation seized them. Chairman Chao was wounded! Vice-Chairman Kuo was missing! They stopped short, not knowing what to do.

"Who'll go and look for Kuo?" Team Leader Hsiao asked quickly.

"I'll go," answered Little Wang.

"I too," echoed Liu Sheng.

"I too," responded Hua.

The three turned back to Sanchia, accompanied by five armed guards. It was dusk when they got to the field where the battle had taken place. Here and there, the people were busy burying the dead bandits. Little Wang ordered them to search the whole area, and he himself went to where Kuo was believed to have been. He suddenly heard a rustling of dry leaves among some shrubs, and taking out his gun, he shouted:

"Who goes there?"

"Me, here! Are you Comrade Wang?" answered a voice rec-

ognizable as Old Chin's. Little Wang dashed into the bush, crying loudly:

"Here they are! Comrades, come on. Here!"

They all came together and found Kuo and Old Chin both wounded—the one in the chest and thigh, and the other in the left leg, both unable to walk. They had been trying to crawl towards a puddle about a hundred yards away, both feeling as thirsty as if their parched mouths were smoking. When they saw Little Wang, they did not ask about the bandits, but gasped:

"Water! Water!"

Little Wang knew that cold water was bad for the wounded, to say nothing of stagnant, foul water. He was determined not to let them drink from the puddle, but they were in such agony, Kuo implored pitifully:

"Comrade Wang! Just a drop! For pity's sake."

Old Chin, for his part, swore:

"Comrade Wang, are you a revolutionary? Why won't you give us water?"

Little Wang explained that water was bad for them, but they would not listen. At this moment a cart came rumbling down the road.

"Have you found them?" asked a voice. It was Pai.

They immediately cushioned the cart with weeds, and helped the wounded men up onto it. Then the cart set off for the village, where old and young were just asking the work team about Kuo.

When the work team and militiamen reached the South Gate, the villagers plied them with all sorts of questions about the battle. Some of the villagers were shouting slogans, some were dancing the harvest dance, and some singing *The Wind Blows in February* and *Brother and Sister Pioneers*. Chang Ching-hsiang conducted a village band beating drums and gongs. Old Sun came up to the land reform workers and said to the crowd:

"I knew all along that the bandits could easily be finished off. How could they beat our Team Leader Hsiao?"

"Who was it that sweated with fear just now at the sound of a shot in the distance?" asked Pai with a laugh.

"That was bad health," protested Old Sun. "I'm old. If I were young again like you, I could have taken on not fifty but five hundred or five thousand bandits."

The telephone line had been repaired, and Team Leader Hsiao got a message through to the county Party committee. The secretary of the county Party committee commended him over the telephone and told him that Chao was on the way to hospital, and that since he had lost so much blood and his intestines had spilt out the secretary was not sure whether he could live through the night.

"We're sending you two more casualties this evening," said Hsiao. "I hope you'll take good care of them."

Putting down the telephone he told Pai to send the two wounded men at once to the county hospital on a good cart, escorted by two guards.

XX

THE next day, the villagers gave themselves up to merry-making to celebrate the victory over the bandits. Harvest was not yet, and the villagers were doing odd jobs. Some were laying a fresh coat on their peeling mud walls, some repairing the *kang*, some mending the leaks in the roof, some catching fish and shrimps in the river, some making halters for their horses, and cleaning troughs, when the village band struck up somewhere in the north of the village. Trumpets sounded triumphantly. Young people stripped to the waist and old women sucking at their pipes hurried out to look. And presently even those who were doing odd jobs ran to watch the fun.

There was a big crowd in the school playground. Chang Ching-hsiang was dancing and singing. When he saw quite a crowd had gathered, he paused and spoke to those standing around:

"Comrades and folks! Now that we've downed Han Number Six and defeated the bandits, our Peasants' Association is as strong as an iron barrel. You're all calling for a song. What shall I sing?"

"Sing *Selling Thread*,"¹ Old Sun called to him. He was standing high up on a cart behind the others, swinging a whip. He had passed by the schoolhouse a short while ago on his way out of the village

¹ A *yangko* opera, describing how Yen Ching, one of the heroic peasant rebels in the Liang Mountains during the twelfth century, went to town disguised as a pedlar to seek military information.

to cut weeds, but attracted by the singing he had changed his mind, and driven back to listen. Chang sang *Yuan Pao-tung's Sister Curses Yen Ching* in his husky voice, to the accompaniment of castanets:

Your mother bore you

On the bank of a river.

Who could have thought you'd prove

Such a big fool?

While singing, he pointed a finger up at Old Sun, high on his cart. The audience broke into a shout of laughter. Team Leader Hsiao, Little Wang and Liu Sheng, who had come out to watch, could not help smiling.

"Look at this rascal! I've brought him up and taught him to sing, and now he is cursing his father." Old Sun joined in the laughter too.

"This is too long! Sing us something shorter!" one villager demanded.

"Let's have *The Water-melon Cracks*," somebody else suggested. Rattling the castanets, Chang began singing:

Up in her room embroidering flowers,

All of a sudden she thinks of her lover.

And runs outside in the hopes they'll meet.

Face powder first she buys in the street.

Lobsters, crabs and flowers in one hand she lugs,

And a great big melon to her heart she hugs.

Ai-yoh! Ai-yoh!

It's raining outside, and she goes and slips,

Up flies her skirt above her naked hips.

Out fly the lobsters, crabs and flowers,

The face powder too comes down in showers.

The water-melon cracks wide open there.

Ai-yoh! Ai-yoh! Next year, I swear,

This lover who's made me so muddy and wet—

A pair of turtles is all he'll get!

The audience clapped their hands laughing. "No more of those decadent songs," someone shouted. "How about a new one?"

"Right! A new song!" others responded.

"All right." Chang's eye lighted on Liu Sheng. "I'll sing one of the Eighth Route Army songs."

The villagers clapped their approval, whereupon the children

who were tired of the old songs ran back, slipping through under tall fellows' legs. They had been frolicking by themselves in the meadow, playing at soldiers with wooden guns, singing their own rhymes: "On the south side and the north side, a steer throws a heifer." Now they listened to Chang singing:

In the second month the spring winds blow,

From Hunan comes Mao Tse-tung,

His power is great,

He rides the sky,

With a million troops behind him.

The trumpets were playing. As soon as Chang finished, Old Sun said:

"Let's ask Comrade Liu to sing us *The White-haired Girl* now. How about it?"

There was a chorus of approval, and some people nudged Liu Sheng. He stepped forth and sang:

The north wind blows,

The snow flakes whirl. . . .

All of a sudden, there was some movement outside the crowd, and someone said incredulously:

"Nonsense!"

"Rumour!"

"It's true, I tell you. You'll soon see it. The coffin was passing through Yangchiatien just a short while ago."

The villagers lost interest in the singing, and crowded round to ask for news. The drums and trumpets were muffled. Stopping his song in the middle, Liu Sheng stepped over and asked Little Wang:

"What's the matter?"

"They say it is Chao. . . ." Little Wang's voice cracked. "He died."

"Chao died!" Liu Sheng exclaimed, tears springing to his eyes.

The villagers set off to meet Chao's remains. When they reached the West Gate, they saw in the distant fields an unvarnished coffin heaving between brown kaoliang stalks and green maize leaves, carried by eight men. They gathered behind it, and followed it slowly into the village. The little procession crossed the highway bisecting the village and arrived at the schoolhouse where they placed the coffin in the middle of the playground. Somebody lighted

a bean-oil lamp and perched it on the ledge of the bottom plank of the coffin. Somebody else set a plate of tomatoes, a plate of apples, and a sheaf of yellow joss-papers on a low table. They stood in groups before the coffin, holding their caps in their hands, or sat on little heaps of willow and elm leaves on the ground. Some remained silent, others talked in whispers.

"Does his wife know yet?"

"Old Sun's gone to tell her."

"Look! Here she comes."

Mrs. Chao came in through the school gate, accompanied by Mrs. Pai and Mrs. Chang, So-chu and the swineherd Wu Chia-fu. The two other women were supporting her for fear she might collapse. Her thin, sallow face was haggard; however, she was not crying, but stunned by her sudden bereavement. As she passed, the villagers stood up respectfully.

The moment she saw the coffin, she knelt down and burst out crying. Her son So-chu and the little swineherd cried with her, while all present shed tears. They knew that Chao had died for them, and that he was a good man. His small family of three had suffered untold hardships and poverty, but they had barely been liberated before Chao died.

"Oh, my husband! Why have you left me behind!" Mrs. Chao cried.

"Daddy, why don't you wake up?" So-chu whimpered.

Team Leader Hsiao was trying to subdue his emotion. He was walking up and down, sunk in memories of Chao—how brave he had been, how he had joined the Party. His heart ached, and he dared not raise his head because tears had sprung to his eyes. He sat down under an elm tree, scooping up the loose earth with his hand until he had hollowed out a small hole. This meaningless action seemed to relieve him, for presently he got up and approached the village band. Ordinarily, he had little or no time for music, but now he felt that the drums and trumpets could help drown out his sorrow and keep the spirit of struggle in him.

"Let's have some music," he suggested gently.

The band immediately struck up and played a dirge called *The Dying Swan on the Sand*. The music made Hsiao and the others feel better.

With his feelings under control, Team Leader Hsiao, together

with Little Wang and Liu Sheng, held a Party branch meeting under a poplar to discuss the question of admitting Chao Yu-lin posthumously as a full Party member. This was unanimously agreed upon and Hsiao went inside the office of the work team to ring up the county Party committee which ratified the recommendation of the Party branch. When he came back to the playground, Mrs. Chao was still crying mournfully.

"Oh! My husband! How can I live now you are gone?" Mrs. Chao continued to cry, as if oblivious to the drums beating and the trumpets blowing.

"Don't cry!" they urged. "Don't cry any more!" They could say no more, for they were shedding tears themselves.

Somebody was burning the joss-papers, and the smoke and ashes floated up in the wind to whirl around the coffin. They stood in a semi-circle, the band stopped playing, and the mourning ceremony began, with Liu Sheng officiating. All of them, including the children, solemnly and quietly bowed three times to their departed friend. After the ceremony, Old Sun stepped forward and suggested:

"Friends, let's lift the lid and let Mrs. Chao take a last look at her husband."

While they were opening the coffin, Mrs. Chao drew herself up weakly to her feet.

Old Sun quickly warned her:

"Mrs. Chao, wipe your eyes dry. Don't let a single tear drop on him!"

Old Tien added another warning:

"And don't let your shadow fall on him either."

"That might mean bad health for yourself," explained the carter.

She did not appear to have heeded these warnings. She neither wiped her tears nor looked to see whether the sun was throwing her shadow across the coffin. She leaned over, looked at her husband's ashy, bearded face, and cried louder, shaking all over, her tears dropping down in strings of beads.

Old Sun and two other villagers quickly replaced the lid of the coffin. She continued crying:

"Oh! My husband, you've had a hard life. You were given a few clothes to wear, but you wore them only a few days."

Some people began making speeches in memory of the deceased,

recalling the services he had rendered to the people and discussing how to commemorate him.

"Brother Chao was a good worker," said Old Sun. "He got up early and went to bed late, busying himself all day long with public affairs. He served his poor fellow-villagers with selfless devotion. He was the first to make sacrifices and the last to receive benefits. He was our good chairman."

Pai shouted:

"Follow Chao's example and serve the people like him!" All shouted with him. Then Old Sun went on:

"He belonged to Class 1, Grade 1, but, instead of taking clothes for this class, he contented himself with those for Class 3, Grade 3. He gave himself and his family only three worn shirts and three pairs of old trousers. He said to his wife: 'So long as we are not naked as before, we ought to be satisfied.'" At this, Mrs. Chao cried afresh, and the carter urged her: "Mrs. Chao, don't cry, please. You make me forget my speech." Then he turned to the others and resumed: "Now he is dead. He laid down his life for us. Shall we help the dead or those he has left?"

"We must take care of his family," all the villagers responded in chorus.

"Our Chairman Chao died for us all," said Chang standing up from the crowd. "He played his part in the revolution. Now his family is in difficulties, we should certainly help them. We mustn't let them go cold and hungry. Do you agree?"

"We agree!" a thousand men shouted with one voice.

"All right, then each group had better elect a representative to discuss the details."

Meanwhile, Little Wang, Liu Sheng, and a few other young men were listening to Wan and Old Chu talking under a poplar tree in one corner. They said that a bullet had pierced the right side of Chao's belly and made the intestines spill out. They had tried to ram the intestines back into the belly. Clenching his teeth, the wounded man asked for another bullet to finish him.

"Comrade Chao, you'll get well. Don't worry," Wan had said.

At the hospital, before they entered the gate, blood had spurted out of his mouth; the cart stopped, and Wan held his hand.

"I'm dying," he had said. Wan had asked him what he wanted to say, but he had only shaken his head.

"I have no more to say. I'm going off, but a revolutionary isn't afraid of death," he had said slowly. Then he breathed his last.

After he died the county government had provided a new suit and a coffin for him.

Now Pai was standing before the coffin in the semi-circle formed by the villagers, and Little Wang and Liu Sheng had both walked over. Pai's eyes were red, and he spoke very briefly.

"We are all peasants," he said. "We know that 'from one grain sown into mother earth, one thousand grains will spring!' Chairman Chao died at the hands of the Kuomintang bandits. We poor folks should support and join the Peasants' Association. Our one thought should be to overthrow the landlords and the reactionary regime of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang to avenge our chairman's death."

The villagers shouted slogans. Big Li stepped forth and unbuttoned his jacket.

"Chairman Chao was the enemy of the landlords and rich peasants, who had done everything in their power to harm him. The other day, they set fire to his fuel pile. Now the Kuomintang bandits have taken his life. We must avenge him! We must wipe out all the bad people, all the bandits."

While the people were shouting slogans after the speeches, Team Leader Hsiao walked gravely to the gathering. Restraining his grief for his dead friend, he said slowly:

"Comrade Chao was a worthy son of the village of Yuanmao. He died a glorious death fighting the bandits for us, and his selflessness and courage will always be an inspiration to us all. To commemorate him, all the peasants who have not joined the Peasants' Association should join quickly. To commemorate him, we should strengthen our organization. We should make our Association as strong as an iron barrel, so that no one can destroy it. Comrade Chao was a probationary member of the Chinese Communist Party at the time of his death. Now, on behalf of the Party branch of the Yuanmao work team, let me tell you that the Party committee of Hochu County has approved the decision of the Party branch to recognize Comrade Chao Yu-lin, posthumously, as a full Party member."

The audience broke into thunderous applause. The trumpets sounded, and Chang conducted the band. Someone had hoisted the

red flag, which was waving proudly and cheerfully in the breeze under the blue sky, amid the green poplar and elm trees. Women and children were singing the song *Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*. Pai and Hua with three other militiamen cocked their five new rifles won from the bandits and fired a salute skywards. Old Sun, who was sitting and chatting, started in fright and dropped his grey felt hat on the ground.

"Why didn't you warn us you were going to fire?" he exclaimed. "I thought it was bandits making another raid!"

Apart from Han's relatives, friends, and henchmen, all the villagers joined in the funeral procession.

Trumpets sounded a dirge called *The Dead Swan*, and the red flag fluttered at the head of the procession, while the villagers shouted: "Follow the example of Comrade Chao and serve the people!" and "Avenge Chao's death by wiping out the Chiang Kai-shek bandits!" Finally, the procession reached the bank of the river outside the North Gate, where Big Li and several other young men dug a grave close by that of Old Tien's daughter. While the coffin was being let down into the grave, Mrs. Chao cried herself hoarse and wailed hysterically, throwing herself before the coffin. The moist earth and green weeds were shovelled back in place over the white coffin and a mound arose. In the ruddy light of the setting sun, over the red beards of the kaoliang, by the water quietly flowing, the trumpets sounded a dirge called *Lament the Dead on the Great Wall* and the drums rolled. The dirge drowned the wailing of the mourners.

In the days that followed, applications for membership flowed into the Peasants' Association. About one hundred peasants were admitted. Many among them called upon Team Leader Hsiao and signified their desire to join the Communist Party.

So, Pai was right when he said: "From one grain sown into mother earth, one thousand grains will spring!"

XXI

A FEW days after Kuo and Old Chin had returned to the village, Team Leader Hsiao received a telephone message from the county Party committee calling him to a meeting in the county seat to

sum up the mass work during the period just over. He was also told to plan another phase of the mass work in the village and leave it in the hands of his men. It looked as if he was to be transferred to another post. He immediately conferred with Kuo, Pai and Big Li, and then called a meeting of the land reform workers. Liu Sheng was to stay in Yuanmao and to carry on.

On the eve of his departure, Team Leader Hsiao went to the Association. Kuo, whose leg was not yet cured, was lying on the *kang*. Sitting down on the edge of the *kang* and lighting a cigarette, the team leader said:

"Liu Sheng and Section Leader Chang will stay with you people. Discuss any problems you have with them."

"I'm afraid I'm not equal to the work," Kuo replied.

"Don't worry. Rely on the poor. The more people you consult, the wiser your decisions will be."

"What should our Association do in future?"

Team Leader Hsiao thought for a while and asked:

"What's your opinion about Tu? How many *mou* of land has he?"

"You mean Goodman Tu? In this village alone, more than eight hundred *mou*. I've no idea about his land holdings in other villages."

"Do the villagers want to tackle him?"

"I'm not sure that they see eye to eye about him. His nickname is 'Goodman,' and he certainly knows how to fool people. Many don't even know in what ways exactly he's bad."

"How can a landlord not be bad?" asked Team Leader Hsiao.

"Every landlord is bad, I know. But not all the villagers realize that yet."

"Have them make a careful reckoning with him," said Hsiao. "Let me ask you, how many farmhands does Goodman Tu hire?"

"Over a dozen."

"How many *mou* can one work?"

"About fifty *mou*."

"What's the yield of fifty *mou*?"

"About forty piculs if the harvest is good."

"Then a farmhand can get for his yearly wages thirty piculs, can he?"

"Oh, no! He gets seven or eight piculs at most!"

"That's just it! You can now figure out how that landlord racks his tenants. This is how you should argue the case. Make them all realize that every landlord is a blood-sucker. Every tenant has the right to claim back the fruits of his own labour. Though we haven't the time to discuss the details today, remember this: when you fight against feudalism and settle scores with the landlords, you've a free hand. If anything happens, I shall support you. Well, I must be going now. Keep in close touch with Liu Sheng. Could you arrange a cart for me tomorrow? All right, goodbye. Oh, don't get up. Goodbye!"

Kuo was very sorry to see Hsiao go. Though he did not get off the *kang*, he followed the team leader with his eyes through the window, until the latter disappeared into Old Tien's house. Only then did he lie down again.

When Team Leader Hsiao had said goodbye to Old Tien, he went on to drop in on Mrs. Chao, Pai and Big Li. When he got back to the schoolhouse, it was after midnight, and everybody was asleep. He woke Liu Sheng up and chatted with him until cock-crow.

"It's pretty hard on Chao's widow. See to it that she's always taken good care of. Remember So-chu ought to go to school next spring." Team Leader Hsiao found it very hard now to keep his eyes open.

"So-chu! What? You mean Chao's child?" Liu Sheng asked. He was wide awake, and wanted to chat more.

"Yes." Hsiao answered in a distant voice and fell asleep. For about two months he had not had a good night's sleep. He was worn to a shadow. At thirty, his hair was already streaked with silver.

The next morning there was a bright sun and heavy dew—a fresh, early autumn morning. And the land reform workers after their success felt as fresh as the morning. "I'm glad to be going," said Little Wang. "It's boring to stay in the same village." "We're glad to be staying," said Liu Sheng. "When you're used to a place, you don't want to leave." So each considered his own job the best.

A four-wheeled cart rolled into the playground of the schoolhouse, drawn by four sleek, fat horses. As soon as the cart stopped, they arched their necks, neighed, and pawed the ground.

With a smile all over his face Old Sun jumped down, brandishing his whip.

"So, it's you again!" Little Wang greeted him, while they were loading the baggage-rolls up onto the cart.

"Of course, it's me. Who else in Yuanmao is good enough for this job?" A smile creased the carter's wrinkled face.

"Get on, quick," Team Leader Hsiao urged the armed guards. "Old Sun, get started right away. I don't want to disturb the villagers, they're so busy."

When they reached the West Gate, they were held up by a large gathering waiting to see them off. From every house, every road, men and women had come out. They threw onto the cart green corn-cobs, berries, sloes, wild apples.

"If you put any more on," cried Old Sun, "the horses won't be able to pull such load." With a crack of the whip, he put the horses to a gallop. Team Leader Hsiao looked back at the West Gate where a large crowd was still standing, watching their rapidly receding cart. The horses galloped down a slope, and were soon on level ground again.

In the east the sun was rising, a glory of changing colours and hues. The maize and kaoliang were ripe, while the green elm and willow leaves were touched with gold.

"It looks as if frost will set in shortly," Old Sun observed. "The grain won't grow after frost, so the peasants will get busy harvesting. That's why they say a busy autumn is equal to three busy springs."

"What if they can't harvest in good time?"

"Then, they will have a pretty hard time of it in the fields when it gets cold and frosty in the morning."

The cart was speeding over a strip of low land, which would be muddy in wet weather, but was now dry.

"Old Sun, do you remember this place?" Hsiao asked. "You were splashed all over with mud by that fellow driving Han Number Six's cart!"

"How could I forget?" he answered. "Han was so fierce, who dared to speak then? His word was law. If he wanted you to die, you couldn't live. Now his sun has set, and our sun has risen. If you hadn't come, Team Leader Hsiao, we could never have had today."

"There, he's off again!" laughed Little Wang.

"I'm simply telling a plain truth," Old Sun parried.

"It was the villagers themselves who did it," Team Leader Hsiao explained. "What could we do without them?"

"Team Leader Hsiao, may I ask you a question?" the carter challenged, with a cunning smile. "Is it the people's day now? If so, the people's own opinion is worth considering, isn't it?"

"To be sure," Hsiao answered.

"Very well, then, we people are of the opinion that you're our benefactor. Since we say so, you must be so. Our opinion will carry weight not only with you but also with the county leadership. How could they disagree with us? The people of Yuanmao recognize your great merits, so must they, I'm sure. When you get commended, don't forget me!"

"Go on," Team Leader Hsiao urged with a smile of amusement. "We must try to get there by noon."

"Don't you worry about that. I can easily make it," Old Sun promised, cracking his whip. The horses galloped like a whirlwind, kicking up a cloud of dust trailing behind like the grey tail of some monstrous animal. Before noon, there loomed on the horizon an indistinct mass of buildings and trees—their destination, the county seat.

PART TWO

I

"I've told you everything, Team Leader Hsiao. If you don't believe me, please make inquiries."

"Maybe you've finished, but I'm just beginning. Don't go, don't go. I ask you—have all the landlords of this village really been overthrown? Has all the land been properly divided?"

"You divided the land yourself when you were here last year. As for the landlords, they're finished."

It was the new chairman of the Peasants' Association, Chang Fu-ying, who was talking with Team Leader Hsiao. He was new, but not entirely so. He had been chairman for several months. This was the first time he had met the team leader, though. He was standing with his back to the square table in the light of the bean-oil lamp, and Hsiao was looking at him searchingly. Chang was dressed in a blue woollen suit and puttees. His feet in the shade appeared to be shod in Japanese military boots, not ordinary shoes. His fox-fur cap with the ear-flaps sticking up on both sides showed the lower parts of his ears. His forehead and temples beneath the rim of the cap were oozing with sweat. He took off his cap, exposing greasy hair parted in the middle. Still staring at him, Hsiao suddenly remembered something, and asked with a smile:

"Aren't you the owner of the flapjack shop?"

"Y—yes," Chang mumbled, bowing.

"Last year, Little Yang made a false land-distribution list. You wrote it for him, didn't you?"

"I wasn't to blame," stuttered Chang. "Little Yang wanted it done that way."

"So you're Chang Fu-ying," Hsiao continued unhurriedly, grinning. "I've long known you by reputation, Chairman Chang, and I'm very glad to meet you!"

He paused, then asked:

"How is your business?"

"I closed down long ago. When I got the land, I took to farming. I think it's the best of all trades. One can depend on it." While listening, Hsiao looked at his woollen suit. He would have liked to say: "You call yourself a peasant, eh—the way you dress!" but resisted the impulse and sent him off.

Out in the yard, Chang Fu-ying drew a breath of relief. His boots crunched over the snow in the yard to the road. Hsiao yawned, and asked his orderly Wan, who was making his bed on the *kang*:

"Do you think that fellow looks like a peasant?"

"I've never seen a peasant look like him," Wan answered, shaking his head.

"Have they all gone to bed?"

"Just listen to the snoring; they sound as if they hadn't slept for ages."

When Hsiao listened, he could hear snores from the next room. The new work team he had brought with him this time was made up of youngsters selected from different areas. He had wanted to have a talk with them, but dropped the idea now. He turned to Wan:

"You go to bed too."

The world was asleep. The north wind was blowing, rattling the windows. The village dogs were yelping, and in the distance wolves were howling. Hsiao sat down, trimmed the light, and, taking out his pen, made an entry in his diary:

"Yuanmao is one of the villages where comparatively satisfactory spade-work was done in the land reform. But during the last year a lot of the old cadres have been transferred to jobs elsewhere, and this has considerably weakened the local leadership. Success or failure in the work hinges, of course, in large measure upon the men who lead it. The movement seems to have risen and died down like a wind, but there has been no real heightening of the villagers' class consciousness. Reaction seems to be raising its head again. Chang Fu-ying, Chairman of the Peasants' Association, is a dubious character; his social status and family origin must be looked into. How did he get into the association and have himself made chairman? And then there is the problem of Kuo. . . ."

He would have liked to write on, but was too tired. His head seemed a bit feverish, and he knew this was a sign of overwork.

He had attended a meeting of the county Party committee all day in the county seat, at the close of which he had immediately set out with his team and managed to get here before dark. They had travelled nearly twenty miles on an open cart in the wind and snow; and, directly they arrived, Hsiao had called in Chang and talked with him for two hours. Now he glanced at his watch—it was past twelve o'clock. He pulled off his shoes, unbuttoned his cotton-padded coat, and was going to get on the *kang* when he touched with his right hand something in his pocket, drew it out and laid it on the table. It was the *Outline of Agrarian Law*. Lying on the *kang*, his last thought was: "I must find out about Chang Fu-ying." Soon he was fast asleep.

This took place on a windy night towards the end of October 1947. In mid-October while the county Party secretaries were meeting at the provincial capital, *The Northeast China Daily* had published the *Outline of Agrarian Law* recently promulgated by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party; and the Party secretaries had discussed and studied this document carefully. Upon his return to the county, Hsiao Hsiang had convened a conference of district Party secretaries, at which the resolutions of the county Party secretaries had been studied and other matters discussed. In accordance with the land reform law, the district secretaries had decided to launch a new mass movement to wipe out the remaining feudal institutions and influences. They had divided the county into twenty "points" and organized more than three hundred comrades into twenty land reform work teams. On this windy day, before dusk, these work teams had set out through the four gates of the county seat in over a hundred open carts, horses' hoofs clattering through all the streets and iron-rimmed wheels grating on the cobbled surface of the roads, while the men and women in the carts sang cheerfully. This commotion lasted a whole hour before the town settled down to its normal quiet.

Having made a careful study of Yuanmao Village, Hsiao resolved to bring his team to carry out the new policy here before putting it into effect generally.

He had been promoted to the rank of county Party secretary in place of a man who had been transferred to South Manchuria. The people of the county called him Commissioner Hsiao, but the Yuanmao villagers preferred to address him by his former title, Team

Leader Hsiao. We shall leave him now sleeping soundly on the *kang* in the Peasants' Association, to see what Chang Fu-ying did after he went home.

Chang was eating his heart out. Team Leader Hsiao had come back, after all, and he was no fool. Chang decided to change into old tattered clothes the next morning. He was afraid it was already too late, though. He had been living in the Peasants' Association, but, having vacated the rooms in favour of Hsiao and his team, he was back in his own three-roomed house in the south of the village. Chang had previously let the east room to an old bachelor by the name of Long-legs Hou. Now he ejected Hou and ensconced himself in the warm room where Hou had lit a stove and heated the *kang*, leaving Hou to sleep in the west room where the *kang* had not been repaired that autumn and could not therefore be heated properly.

Pulling off his brown Japanese army boots and blowing out the bean-oil lamp, Chang stretched himself on the *kang*, but could not fall asleep, turning from one side to the other. With wide-open eyes, he kept gazing at the windowpane which, frosted over, was bright in the starlight. The more he thought about it, the more angry he was with the militiamen.

"The fools! Why didn't they send me word? Now I *am* in a mess!"

Since becoming chairman of the Peasants' Association, Chang had done a number of things which would not bear looking into; and, fearing that government workers might come from the county or district, he had hired five militiamen to act as bodyguard, scout, door-keeper, night watchman and cook, each at the paltry wage of twenty-five thousand dollars a month. Normally, the scout kept watch over the road from the county, and at the sight of anyone looking like a government official he would run to warn his master. But, this evening, because there was a high wind, he had gone home. Consequently, Hsiao's arrival in the village had taken Chang by surprise. Thinking what a poor figure he had cut before Hsiao, he cursed his men and himself, and in a dazed state of mind asked himself:

"What shall I do?"

Chang Fu-ying, nicknamed Bad-egg Chang, had inherited about two hundred *mou* of land, but after his parents died had sold it

piece after piece, to purchase the pleasures of wine and women. When he had nothing left, he borrowed money from his friends and relations and set up a flapjack shop. He could talk and argue, write and count, and was able to draw together other rascals like himself; they formed a group by themselves in the village. In the year of the land reform, Goodman Tu paid him a visit and presented him with two bottles of white wine and fifty thousand dollars, asking for his help. Chang was quite agreeable, and later he collaborated with Little Yang in the false division of land. When this trick was discovered by Hsiao, Chang began to fear and hate the team leader, but there was nothing he could do. Afterwards, Hsiao left the village, and Chang decided to come forward once more. He closed his shop and showed up at village meetings. He could swear and fight, and had plenty of nerve. Some of the villagers thought he had reformed, because he took an active part in village affairs, and after he became chairman of the Peasants' Association people stopped talking about his past. Chang bore a grudge against Tsui, a sub-landlord,¹ living in the east side of the village. When the villagers were settling scores with Tsui, Chang won credit for the way he dealt with him. He produced two gold rings and six bundles of clothes which Tsui had stowed away, and two of these bundles he had found himself by climbing up the roof and groping in the chimney-stack. When he leapt down, his arms, face and clothes were covered with soot. The peasants made him a group leader and, when Pai Yu-shan was sent to a Party school to study, Chang took his place as chief of the militia. After Liu Sheng, the district Party secretary, went to another post in South Manchuria, his successor, Chang Chung, devoted most of his time to a few villages near the mountains and seldom came to Yuanmao. Chang Fu-ying, meanwhile, worked harder and had himself elected vice-chairman of the Peasants' Association. Now his mates and associates flocked to him and he gave them posts as group leaders. Thick as thieves, they were out to do for Kuo Chuan-hai.

After Big Li had left to join a stretcher group, Kuo was carrying on without his help. The chairman, a good worker, was,

¹ Any person who rents large areas of land from landlords, who does not himself engage in labour but sub-lets the land to others for rent, and whose living conditions are better than those of an ordinary middle peasant, is classified as a sub-landlord.

however, a simple soul. When cornered by opponents, his face flushed and his throat muscles twitched, often unable to find a suitable answer. Some of the villagers were deceived, others knew that Kuo was all right and that Chang was up to no good; but because Chang had so many followers, they dared not speak out. There were few Party members in the village, and they were not well organized, while some of them, like Hua Yung-hsi, thought only of their farm work. When Chang's newly appointed group leaders saw Kuo grow angry, they jeered at him:

"His flushed face and swollen throat can frighten no one."

"How dare he try to ride roughshod over us?"

"This isn't Manchukuo; why should we be afraid of him?"

One day, Old Sun, emboldened by drinking, spoke up for Kuo, offending Chang's gang and bringing a hornets' nest about his own ears.

"What do *you* know? Who the hell are *you*?"

"Old bastard, poking your nose into things that don't concern you! Who wants *your* opinion? Take off your shoe and look at yourself in the shiny sole!"

"Hold your tongue, or we shall call a meeting to settle scores with you!"

Cowed by this last remark, Old Sun muttered, "All right, all right! Forget it!" He strode off, back to his cart and cup. After that he stopped talking about the revolution, and confined himself to his stories about bears. "What a black mass a bear is!" he would begin. "But how simple!"

Kuo felt like a one-man orchestra in the Peasants' Association; but the more worried he was, the more easily he lost his temper. He went and quarrelled with one of Chang's men, and later, when Chang called a meeting of the group leaders, everybody was eager to find fault with Kuo. One of them said: "We could very well do without this sort of chairman."

Another went farther:

"We support Chang. Time Kuo abdicated."

One man suggested rudely:

"Let him go home and look after his children."

Another caught up, smirking:

"Has he children? He's not married."

Somebody cried angrily:

"Who cares a fig whether he's married. Let him get out of his office, that's all."

A hypocrite turned to him:

"Chairman Kuo, why don't you go home now and have a rest? It will do you good."

This case was brought to the attention of Chang Chung. But the district Party secretary was at the moment preoccupied with affairs in some other villages, and did not understand the situation. Instead of making an investigation, he disposed of the delegation from Yuanmao in a casual manner, saying:

"What the people say must be right. Go back and ask the people what they want to do with Kuo."

Chang Fu-ying and his group leaders immediately set out to enlist the support of other men, such as his relatives and friends, those who wanted to go with the stream, those who believed Chang to be the victor. One Li Kuei-yung, Li Chen-chiang's nephew, who had lately returned to the village, was especially devoted to Chang and pulled wires for him. All preparations completed, Chang called a mass meeting to deal with Kuo. The villagers present, overwhelmed by Chang's coterie, readily agreed to depose Kuo. So, Chang's followers began to run the whole show.

Old Tien whispered to Old Sun:

"This is another dynasty, eh!"

Old Sun responded with a sigh:

"You're telling me. But what say do *we* have in official business? Whoever the emperor is, we just pay the taxes."

Kuo went to the district to see Chang Chung, but to no purpose; then he surrendered his room in the Peasants' Association and went back to the tumbledown stable, which had been given him out of a landlord's confiscated property. On this of all days it was pouring, and since the roof leaked, his whole bed was wet. When the rain stopped, Kuo borrowed from a neighbour a wheelbarrow and scythe and laid in a sufficient quantity of grass. Another day's labour, and the roof was repaired. He set to clean the *kang* and the chimney and plaster the wall. Finally he succeeded in turning a stable into a habitable place. Kuo did not possess a single pot or pan, so he went to Old Sun to borrow one. The old carter knew that he had nothing, so hastily obtained for him from some friends some bowls, dishes, a ladle and a kitchen knife. Chao Yu-lin's wife

gave him a *kang* mat. The swineherd Wu Chia-fu brought along a triangular-shaped broken glass pane and fitted it onto the window frame, papering up the glassless corners and cracks. In no time the empty stable was furnished. Kuo's friends came to see him, and they still called him chairman. This came to the ears of Chang's militia, who threatened:

"Whoever calls him chairman again shall be put behind the bars."

Then the villagers stopped calling him chairman openly, but continued to do so privately. Kuo took to peddling—he made a living and lived a peaceful life. At night, he lay down, puffing at a stemmed pipe with a blue jade mouth-piece which had belonged to Chao Yu-lin. Looking through the triangular windowpane at the starlit sky, he remembered his days in the Peasants' Association, when, often tired out, he dozed over the table. Now, he was lying comfortably on the *kang* and smoking. "One who has no official duties has a light heart." With this he began snoring.

Kuo did not go again to report to the district officer. Now that he was out, Chang became chairman. The first thing he did was to hire five militiamen to do scouting and spying for him. He had his sworn brother, Tang Shih-yuan, made head of the village. This Tang came from the clan of Snatcher Tang, and had formerly been a commissioned officer of the army of the puppet Manchukuo. Chang also appointed Li Kuei-yung clerk of the Peasants' Association. This man had not been in the village while Team Leader Hsiao was there. Back in the Manchukuo regime, he had been an air-raid warden, it being his duty to scan the skies for Soviet airplanes and raise an alarm. Upon the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, he had made himself scarce from the village and had since been goodness knows where. Now, he had come back. He took part in all the meetings to deal with landlords, and was not afraid to beat or curse them, so he became an activist. Chang, Tang and Li were banded together like three strands of a rope. They had all powers in their hands. In combating landlords, the Big Three led the men of their choice, the group leaders of the Peasants' Association, who, in turn, had in tow a gang of dubious characters among the villagers. They dealt with rich peasants and middle peasants as they pleased. They attacked Li Chen-chiang, a rich peasant, only from the political angle, but did not confiscate his

property in excess of what he was permitted to keep. On the other hand, because they did not like Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, they took away his horse. When the meetings to settle scores with the landlords were over, no distribution was made of the gains of the struggle. The three of them ensconced themselves snugly in the Association premises, with militiamen pacing up and down outside the gate. They spent their time drinking, singing, playing the gramophone and cracking sunflower seeds. They sold the confiscated property and with the proceeds set up a co-operative store on the highway selling only women's stockings and cosmetics. Twice they advanced the villagers some money—fifty dollars each the first time, and one hundred the second. But the villagers said contemptuously: "Less than two days' wages!"

Li Kuei-yung was a short man with a long face, as cunning as they come. He did not show himself often in public, and whenever anything went wrong he just laid the blame on Chang Fu-ying. He knew that Chang was in love with a woman in a Yang family by the East Gate. She was called Little Mi and had a bad name in Yuanmao. As soon as Chang became chairman of the Peasants' Association, she began to frequent the premises. She prattled and giggled and lingered until after midnight. To please Chang, Li arranged things so that Little Mi was elected chairman of the newly established Women's Association, which was housed in the east wing of the premises of the Peasants' Association. The signboard of the new Association was a foot longer than that of the Peasants' Association. Seeing that Little Mi was there, decent women forbade their daughters and daughters-in-law to visit the Peasants' Association. Even active workers like Mrs. Chao and Mrs. Pai stopped going. Little Mi solicited the support of a dozen women of her own kind. "Carp goes with carp, and turtle goes with turtle."

Little Mi and her dozen called at every house in the village to "change the old habits and customs of women." They compelled all women to cut off their hair. When anyone hesitated, they whisked out scissors and cut off her hair by force. Some ladies of Manchu origin shed bitter tears, seeing their coils shorn from the tops of their heads. Then the Women's Association ordered all women below middle age to wear white shoes. Those poor women who went about barefoot in summer and autumn could not afford this. They had no money to buy white cloth and no time to make white shoes, and so they could do nothing but cry.

That year, when all able-bodied men and women went to hoe and weed the fields, Chang and Little Mi marched up and down a few times like landlords, then disappeared into a clump of hazels. In another moment the leaves were shaking and rustling. A youngster was intrigued, laid down his hoe and ran into the thicket. Little Mi's voice was heard:

"Don't do that! Someone's coming."

Thinking he had been seen, the youth quickly withdrew behind some maize.

She said again:

"Don't. I'll scream. No, not in broad daylight."

She did not call out, however. She giggled. Hazel and maize leaves rustled more energetically.

Her husband eventually got wind of the affair and went to the Peasants' Association to kick up a row; but Li Kuei-yung seized him and dragged him half a mile along the road thrashing him. People thought it was too much.

Li posted a notice on the door: "No Admission." If anybody still went in, he would say: "If anything is lost, you'll be held responsible." Thus, nobody dared to set foot on the Association premises, except to get a road pass.

Above the door of the north wing Li put up another notice: "Lecture Ground." And the villagers had to assemble several times a month in the yard to listen to a lecture from Chang. Once Old Sun was also forced to listen to him. After finishing his speech, Chang asked the villagers:

"Did you understand what I said?"

Eager to get back to the fields and afraid that failure to understand might cause trouble, they all answered:

"Yes, we did."

Chang stalked up to Old Sun and demanded:

"What did I say?"

The latter straightened up and boomed:

"Goodness knows what you were talking about!"

Guffaws followed. Discomfited, with his eyes goggling and his neck swelling, Chang gave Sun a heavy kick with his leather-shod foot.

Now, Team Leader Hsiao was back in the village! Chang did not have a wink of sleep all night. In the early morning, at the

first crow of the cock, he tumbled off the *kang* and shambled out to see his friends, to whom he said:

"We've the work team with us once more, and we must supply them with food and fuel; but we mustn't make them stay longer than necessary. We can't be too cautious. Don't speak carelessly and get us all into trouble. Trouble is no fun. If anybody isn't satisfied with the Peasants' Association, I can put matters right later on. An unexposed village is a good village—a concealed family is a good family. Whatever they may ask, don't say anything."

On his way home from seeing his friends, as Chang crossed the highway, he met people going in small groups to the Peasants' Association. While they were chatting and laughing all around him, he felt his heart thumping and his legs giving way beneath him. The first snow was fluttering down and flakes settled on his forehead to melt into watery beads, coursing down his feverish cheeks.

II

THE whole village turned out to see Team Leader Hsiao again. At the crack of dawn, the courtyard of the Association premises was already filled to overflowing, men and women in a murky mass pushing here and there, waiting for Hsiao to make his appearance. Old Sun and a hefty young man were making their way into the north room. The latter was eighteen-year-old Chang Ching-shui, brother of Chang Ching-hsiang who had joined the army. He was tall and strong and able to do the work of two men. Though he was an army dependent, he refused the preferential treatment he was entitled to. He tilled his land on his own and produced the best maize crop of the year in the village, every grain fat and every cob about a foot long. Wearing a dog-skin cap, he stepped into the inner room and found Hsiao lying on the *kang*. He said with a smile:

"Not yet up? He's overslept!"

Approaching the *kang*, he was going to wake Hsiao up when Old Sun stopped him, saying:

"Wait a minute. Let him sleep a while longer. Morning sleep is sweetest; it's like a new wife, mutton dumplings and chicken soup."

"What wife and chicken!" suddenly Hsiao sat up. He put on

his cotton-padded coat, his legs and feet still underneath the quilt. Meanwhile, more people were streaming into the premises, squeezing into the inner room, pushing up to the *kang*. Hsiao pushed aside the quilt, turned round and got his legs into a pair of woollen trousers which he had brought with him all the way from Yen-an. Looking around, he saw familiar faces and thought it unnecessary to address himself to anybody in particular. Sitting on the edge of the *kang*, he put his feet on a bench and was pulling on his shoes when he caught sight of Old Sun and opened on him good-humouredly:

"Old chap, still alive!"

"If I had died, my wife would have cried her way to the district to find you," the old carter answered, smiling and narrowing his left eye as usual. While fastening his puttees, Hsiao continued to exchange playful remarks with Sun. Chao Yu-lin's wife put in a word too:

"Hearing that you had come back, our little swineherd jumped for joy."

With seven mouths and eight tongues, all talking together, they tried to tell Hsiao how they had missed him.

"Before the maize was ripe, we were waiting for you."

"We longed for the stars, we longed for the moon, we longed for you—but you didn't come! We thought you had forgotten us after you left us."

Hsiao answered with a smile:

"How could I? I shall never forget you."

Having put on his shoes, Hsiao took a basin from the corner of the room and was stepping to the outer room for some water, when he saw Mrs. Pai standing on the threshold, leaning against the door frame. She had bobbed her hair, and was gazing at him with bright eyes below beautiful black brows. She looked so eager to speak that Hsiao said:

"How are you, Mrs. Pai? Old Pai is doing very well in the public security office at Shuangcheng, but he misses you!"

She answered, pursing up her lips:

"I'm sure he doesn't. It's more like him to go away and forget. . . ."

Hsiao laughed and was going to speak again when he heard a rumbling of wheels in the courtyard. He followed the crowd out,



The whole village turned out to see Team Leader Hsiao again.

looked through the open door of the outer room to the yard, and saw Old Tien driving in a cartload of fuel. Tien whoaed his horse, came up to the north wing, leaned his whip against the wall below the eaves and saluted Hsiao as he entered the room, saying:

"I thought you might need some fuel, so I've brought over a cartload. When that's finished I'll fetch more. Being so close to the mountain, our village has plenty of fuel if nothing else."

In another moment, dozens of people had surrounded the cart and started unloading the wood. They piled the dry elm branches one upon another in the shape of a parapet below the eaves of the north wing. The falling snow quickly covered it with a white eider-down.

They also lit a fire in the wall stove with the elm wood. With the rooms heated, they lingered on and refused to go home for lunch. They were sitting on the *kang*, on the table, everywhere. Some were taking turns to try on Hsiao's overcoat. Some were toying with his automatic. Old Sun was poking about too, and when he saw the brand-new weapon he exclaimed:

"Look, folks, this gun is made in accordance with the Book of Heaven."

"Enough of your superstition!" protested Chang Ching-shui. "What's that nonsense, the Book of Heaven? This gun is man-made."

"You doubt the Book of Heaven? Well, let me ask you, didn't Chuke Liang¹ learn from the Book of Heaven how to call up the east wind?" Sitting at the square table, Old Sun continued, with his head on one side: "Hsueh Ting-shan's wife Fan Li-hua² moved the mountain and overturned the sea, didn't she? Wasn't that because she had the Book of Heaven?"

Chang Ching-shui was no match for Old Sun in argument and

¹ Chuke Liang (181-234 A.D.), a strategist and astrologist, was Prime Minister of the State of Shu during the period of the Three Kingdoms. The novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* describes him as the man who, having command over the elements, once during a winter campaign scourged the enemy with fire by calling up the east wind.

² Hsueh Ting-shan and Fan Li-hua are the hero and the heroine of the novel *The Western Expedition*, which describes how Emperor Tang T'ai-tsung, who reigned in 627-649 A.D., waged war against the foreign tribes inhabiting regions on the west of China. Hsueh was a general of the Tang Dynasty and Fan was his wife. According to the novel, she was a brave warrior capable of moving the mountain and turning the sea.

decided to ignore him. He bent his head and began fingering the books on the table. When he picked up the *Outline of Agrarian Law*, Hsiao commented with a smile, pointing at the book:

"This is better than the Book of Heaven. This is the Book of Earth. It's a book about the division of land issued by Chairman Mao. Follow it, and everybody is sure to have a better life." He went on to explain the land reform law, concluding:

"This time we'll carry out the land reform strictly according to the newly promulgated land law. We'll do away with feudalism once and for all; the more thoroughly we do the job, the more firmly we'll stand. Have you folks really stood up?"

This question set every tongue wagging. Some grumbled, some laughed, some cursed. It was impossible to hear who was saying what. After a while, when things were a little quieter, Old Tien leaning against the wall spoke out:

"In our village the rascals have come up on top and grown fat. Formerly we ploughed for the landlords, now we shoulder spears to protect the scum of the earth."

Old Sun caught up:

"We've been catching a hare to feed a hawk."

Chang Ching-shui also complained:

"What change has there been I'd like to know! Last year I got a cotton-padded suit. I wore it on the hills collecting fuel, so now it's tattered. It has been snowing, but we army dependents have no winter clothing. Yet look at the landlords—they still go about in long gowns and short jackets."

"Do the landlords still live on rent?" asked Hsiao.

Old Tien answered: "On what if not on rent? They surrendered a few *mou* of bad land—but they keep innumerable *mou* of good land, hire them out and live on the rent, without having to hoe or scythe themselves."

Mrs. Pai stepped forward and said:

"You're only talking about the land they kept. If Team Leader Hsiao hadn't come, they would very likely be wanting back their houses."

"That's quite true." This was from Old Tien's blind wife, who had groped her way into the room with the help of a cane. She went on: "One day in the eighth month, Han's concubine Chiang Hsiu-ying barged into the courtyard, posted herself in the middle and

haughtily told my old man to take good care of the place and keep it clean, because a plant with a red flower was growing on the roof of her house and the elm outside the gate was bursting into white bloom. That meant good luck for the Hans, so they might come back to their own mansion at any moment."

Chang Ching-shui interjected:

"All humbug! Don't believe a word of it. How could a plant blossom on the roof and an elm bear white flowers?"

"I've never heard of an elm flowering white," Old Sun said. "But I've seen with my own eyes a red flower on a roof. A strange thing, but true. In the twentieth year of the reign of Emperor Kuang Hsu, I remember, I saw a red flower on the roof of Old Tang's house."

Hsiao thought a while and explained:

"It's not so strange. The wind blows the seed onto the house-top, and it grows and blossoms in time."

Turning to the blind old lady, Hsiao queried:

"How is it that you moved out of the rooms given you last year, Mrs. Tien?"

Old Sun answered for her:

"Just thrown out she was."

"Who could have dared throw her out?"

"The powers that be."

Hsiao understood whom they were referring to. He asked what had happened to Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang and whether all their land holdings had been distributed among the peasants. The answers were different, some in the affirmative, some in the negative. Old Tien, sitting on the *kang*, drew up his right leg to knock the bowl of his stemmed pipe against the sole of his shoe, and said with a sigh:

"Ah! Since he became our chairman, curious changes have taken place in our village. He has the landlords' welfare at heart and turns his back upon us poor people. He just made a show of fighting those landlords—just had them pay nominal fines and saved them from further trouble. But when he attacked middle peasants, he was fierce. Liu Teh-shan is a middle peasant, yet the chairman confiscated everything he had while he was away as a stretcher-bearer."

"What kind of peasant is your Chairman Chang?" asked Hsiao.

"He's no peasant at all. He's a loafer."

"He's worse than a loafer."

Hsiao pursued:

"Then why did you elect him chairman?"

Old Tien answered:

"Because he showed up well in the struggle against Tsui."

"What did he do?"

"Produced two gold rings and six bundles."

"Then he must have been keen to begin with. What made him degenerate?"

Different explanations were offered: that he had posed as progressive to begin with just to trick people, that Li Kuei-yung had led him astray, that he had been a bankrupt landlord better known as Bad-egg Chang. Old Sun, who had been silent for a while, spoke up:

"There! What did I tell you? I said he was no good and I warned you folks against electing him, but you took no heed."

Chang Ching-shui blurted out:

"When did you warn us? I only remember he gave you a heavy kick and you took it meekly."

That episode was a disgrace and Old Sun would have given anything not to have it mentioned. He had even hidden it from his wife. And here this youngster Chang Ching-shui had thundered it out! Just to make things uncomfortable for the old man? Well, Old Sun's settled policy in the case of such malice aforethought was to let it go without bothering to answer. He went on his own way:

"You all said that he had changed for the better, had ceased to be a loafer, and was good enough to lead us. I said: 'No! He can never make good. If you don't believe me, you'll see for yourselves.' The proverb says well: 'You can't harness a rabbit.'"

Chang Ching-shui asked:

"Where did you get that proverb? You made it up yourself!"

"Isn't it true that he's a rabbit? But he's not only a rabbit—he's a rat."

Amused, Hsiao interjected:

"If he's a rat, where's his hole?"

Old Sun answered, narrowing his left eye knowingly:

"He finds his hole in the fact that we villagers don't agree, each only interested in his own affairs."

Hsiao nodded in approval. This was precisely the case. He asked:

"Where's Kuo Chuan-hai?"

Old Sun threw in:

"You still remember Kuo! Well, bad luck has hit him. He has been thrown out of the Peasants' Association—he's doing odd jobs."

Old Tien added:

"Yesterday I met him going to the hills, to help somebody drive down a cartload of logs."

The animated conversation flowed on, and at last they had to break up for their long-delayed lunch. With the team leader backing them, they felt safe against Chang Fu-ying and Li Kuei-yung, and walked home with light steps.

III

AFTER lunch Hsiao called his team members to the west wing for a meeting.

Except for Wan, all the members of the team were new to the place. Most government workers from the old liberated areas had been transferred to South Manchuria to get work started there, Little Wang and Liu Sheng among them. Hsiao's team members, sixteen in number, were all young comrades who had acquitted themselves well in the previous year's land reform work in different areas. They were mostly illiterate or rather just beginning to learn to read and write, but they were all keen, able, courageous and responsible. During the land reform movement they had learned about the class struggle; thus the quality of this team was fairly high.

In the county seat, they had taken part in a five-day meeting. Hsiao and two other county Party secretaries were also present from beginning to end. The session had been, as a matter of fact, a short-term training course to discuss and study the land reform law. Today's meeting was to discuss the correct approach to the work in the village and the right attitude towards the villagers. Hsiao presided and said a few words. He then asked them to carry on the discussion themselves and excused himself, as he must go to visit his old friends in the village to gather information as to

how they lived and how they felt, and other conditions prevailing in Yuanmao. He went to the east wing for a drink of water, and then stepped out of the courtyard and on to the road. A light snow was fluttering, and a wind beginning to blow. He let down the ear-flaps of his hare-skin cap and tied the strings below his chin. He thought he should first call on Mrs. Chao, wife of Chao Yu-lin who had given his life to defend Yuanmao. Remembering that she lived in the south side, he was bound in that direction; but midway somebody told him that she had moved to the north side, and he turned back northwards. Mrs. Chao shared the east wing of a house with a widow named Li. She had the north *kang* while Mrs. Li had the south *kang*. The moment Hsiao stepped into the room, So-chu, the child, saw him, jumped off the *kang*, hugged him by the leg and cried out with joy:

"Uncle! Uncle!"

As he called out, the boy was hanging on Hsiao's arm, dangling and swinging, his dirty feet treading on Hsiao's thighs and elsewhere as he climbed up. His mother shouted:

"So-chu! See, how you're dirtying uncle's clothes! Get down at once or I'll slap you!"

So-chu did not budge, knowing his mother would not really beat him. He now had his arms tightly around Hsiao's neck, and his mother did not do as she had threatened. Hsiao hugged him, kissed his face, put him down on the *kang*, and himself sat down on the edge. Mrs. Chao had been plaiting a mat with reeds, for this was her side occupation.

Team Leader Hsiao had come to pay her a courtesy visit. She felt as happy as if welcoming home a relative. She quickly got off the *kang*, asked the owner of the opposite *kang* for a stemmed pipe and some tobacco, lighted a hemp stub from the stove in the outer room and invited the guest to smoke. Hsiao lit his pipe, and started talking as he puffed. Seeing a tattered quilt on the low-legged table, he asked:

"Mrs. Chao, how are you getting along?"

"Everything is all right," she answered. "In the Manchukuo days, we seldom lifted the lid from the pot, yet somehow we kept ourselves alive. Now things are much better, and we live better. If the child needs anything, I can get extra money plaiting mats."

"Do they give you help?"

"Who?" she asked as she wove the strands. "Do you mean the Peasants' Association? They don't care about us."

"Don't they even come with presents on New Year's Day and during festivals?"

She smiled but did not answer. She could never forget how her husband had denied himself for others' sake. It was not for her to speak ill of any man behind his back. But this was too much for Mrs. Li of the south *kang*, who now grumbled on her friend's behalf:

"Presents, indeed! Little Mi, Chairman of the Women's Association, is the only receiver of presents. They have long since forgotten the idea of paying visits to army dependents."

"Is there some one to fetch water for you?"

Mrs. Li answered for her again:

"While he was Chairman of the Peasants' Association, Kuo did come every day to fetch her water. He still does whenever he is in the village, and he also chops wood for us. But when he is away the two of us carry water ourselves. It is all right except that we have no caps to wear in winter, so we come home with frozen ears."

"Isn't the little swineherd still living with you?" asked Hsiao. "Why not ask him to help?"

Mrs. Li explained with a smile:

"Mrs. Chao is so kind-hearted and takes such good care of the orphan that she won't let him do any heavy work for fear he may tire himself. She sends him to school. Team Leader Hsiao, you can't have seen a better woman—she's one in a thousand. Her own child So-chu goes barefoot while the little swineherd is warmly shod."

Bending her head over her work, Mrs. Chao remained silent. Hsiao glanced at her dry, brownish hair—a sign of malnutrition. Yet she was a true daughter of the labouring people. In spite of her own poverty, she helped others and took better care of her ward than of her own child. Like other poor village women, she plaited mats and grain crates at home. Chang Fu-ying, Chairman of the Peasants' Association, and Little Mi, Chairman of the Women's Association, failed to lead and organize the village women, so in their weaving and other side lines they were left to their own devices.

Hsiao did not like to stay long lest the conversation might at an unguarded moment turn upon Chao Yu-lin, and Mrs. Chao might feel unhappy. When he was leaving, outside the gate he met a cheerful-looking boy running home, satchel in hand. The lad was wearing a blue cotton-padded jacket buttoned down the middle and a pair of felt trousers. Hsiao greeted him and, glancing at his feet, saw that he had on black, woollen, cotton-padded shoes which looked solid and handsome. This was the little swineherd Wu Chia-fu.

The little swineherd's cotton-padded shoes reminded Hsiao of So-chu's dirty, unshod feet. He thought: "That woman is, indeed, one in a thousand. She effaces herself for others. She takes after her husband, Comrade Chao." He asked the little swineherd: "What books do you read in school? How do you like your teachers?" After a few encouraging remarks, he walked off. The boy ran into the house. Behind Hsiao the wind was carrying sounds of merriment from the Chao family mingled with So-chu's shouts for joy.

Hsiao turned a corner and walked towards the east side. He was going to pay a visit to Mrs. Pai. When he left the district for this village, her husband had asked him to take a letter to her. That morning, there had been such a crowd, he had forgotten about the letter. Mrs. Pai was living somewhere in the east side, and he hoped he could find the place.

Pai Yu-shan's wife was sitting on the *kang*, plaiting a mat. She was a good hand at it. In the past years, plaiting for pot-bellied rich men, she had used only sixty per cent of her skill. Now that this order for mats and crates had been placed by the government, she spared no efforts. Well-knit and smooth all her mats and crates were. Ever since her husband became a public functionary, she had taken it upon herself to fulfil public orders to the very best of her ability. Why? Because they were from the Eighth Route Army men, and wasn't her husband one of them?

The village women missed their men very much if they left Yuanmao to work outside. And like them, Mrs. Pai was always thinking of her husband while weaving reeds into a mat. Yet though her heart ached for him, she never complained. If somebody had asked:

"Mrs. Pai, do you miss your husband very much?"

She would have jerked up her head and answered:

"Why should I? No, not me."

Nevertheless, her husband was much in her thoughts. What kind of work was he doing? Was he busy all day long? Who darned his clothes and socks for him? An old lady, a young woman, or even a beautiful girl? At this moment, she could not but feel a bit sour. The next instant she pulled so hard at the mat that she cut her middle finger, which started to bleed. She threw down the mat, picked up a strip of cloth from the *kang* table and bandaged the cut; but the blood oozed out and reddened the cloth. As she resumed her work, she began cursing in an undertone:

"Damn you! Since you left, not a single letter have you written home. How could you forget me so soon?"

She was interrupted by a dog barking in the yard. Team Leader Hsiao had come! Quickly laying down her work and getting off the *kang*, she went out to welcome him. As Hsiao pushed open the firmly closed door of the outer room, a puff of cold wind set her shivering. She greeted him:

"Come on in, Team Leader Hsiao. How cold it is! Come in quickly."

It was snowing, and the wind had risen. The temperature had dropped that afternoon. The room felt like autumn, while outside in the yard it was like deep winter. Hsiao's frozen fingers warmed up and stretched out to receive a stemmed pipe from Mrs. Pai. In the conversation that followed, Hsiao was interested to know what was going on in the village, while she tried indirectly to lead up to something else. How far was it from here to Shuangcheng? How long did a letter take to come? She asked detailed questions, but carefully avoided mentioning her husband.

Hsiao smiled and said:

"I've a letter for you from Pai."

He drew out of his pocket the missive, since she could not read she asked him to read it out to her:

Shu-ying, my dear wife,

When I finished the training course in Hulan, I was sent to work in the public security office here in Shuangcheng. I am very well. Some time ago I had eye trouble, but the office doctor cured me. In two months' time, it will be the lunar

New Year, and I hope to come home to see you. Has all the grain been thrashed? Has the government tax been paid? Mind you work hard at home, and don't get behindhand in the land reform movement. But don't argue or fight with the neighbours; if you've any disputes they can always be settled peacefully. Just keep your temper. I send you revolutionary greetings.

Pai Yu-shan, October 9, 1947.

Hsiao handed the letter back to Mrs. Pai. She knew that although the words had been written by somebody else, all the ideas were her husband's own. She put the letter underneath the floral-print quilt on the low-legged table on the *kang*. After Hsiao left, she thought that was not a safe place for a letter, so pulled it out and deposited it in a lamp case. No, that was a risky place, too. She put it in a chest, then felt better and returned to her matting.

On his way home, Hsiao saw Hua Yung-hsi, the gunner, watering a cow by the well. It was early winter, but the water from the well froze directly it was poured into the trough. The cow was drinking from among the floating icicles. As they were old friends, Hsiao called out to Hua. The latter waved his hand, but without his usual warmth. The two stood beside the windlass above the well, chatting. After a while, Hua suggested:

"It's too windy out here. Come to my place."

Shoulder to shoulder they walked slowly, Hua leading the black milch cow. Hsiao talked of this and that and incidentally came to pack animals. He remembered that in the distribution of the landlords' property Hua had been given one-fourth of a horse. The gunner told him that his wife, formerly the widow Mrs. Chang, had bought a whole horse with her savings. Hsiao asked:

"How is it you've now a cow instead of a horse? A horse runs swiftly and ploughs and drags equally well, doesn't it?"

Hua answered:

"A cow is much better. It eats less than a horse. And you don't have to feed it during the night. Another year, and my cow will calve; then I'll have two cows instead of one. And even if the mother should die, I'll still have her big hide." Hsiao realized that peasants in general preferred cows to horses simply because they were afraid that with horses they might have to join in public transport service. Hua's glib reason could be taken only at its face value. Hsiao said with a smile:

"You don't keep a horse, because you want to avoid public transport service—isn't that it?"

"Oh, no!" Hua could not find anything more to say.

Hua could calculate and argue, all because of his wife. Ever since he hitched up with her, he had lagged behind. He did as he was told. He would not budge for anybody else. All the villagers knew that it was she who ruled the roast. One day during the land reform movement she had commanded Hua not to put his neck out, but to put his own family affairs first. They had had quite an argument, and she had warned him, her face flushed and her neck swelling:

"If you go once more to the Peasants' Association, I'll go my own way, taking my things with me, and I'll never see you again."

Hua sat transfixed on the *kang* edge, dumbfounded. He was over forty. He need not call himself old, but he was not young, either. For half a lifetime he had been a bachelor. While working in the field, he had had no one at home cooking for him. Coming home at night tired and sleepy, he had had to make a meal, otherwise he would have starved. Such memories made him hang his head and surrender. Peace at any price, but she must not leave him. Thereafter, her word was law. He left the militia and stopped going to the Peasants' Association. One day his wife said: "With a horse, we're liable to have to give public transport service. We should have a cow instead." The next day Hua led out the horse, arranged an exchange with Li Chen-chiang, and came home with a milch cow. Whenever there was a call for horses for public transport service, Hua repeated his formula: "I've only a cow, a slow-paced thing. It's impossible to harness a cow with a horse. If you put the two together, both would tire to death." So he was exempted from service. His wife always visited and chatted with Li Chen-chiang's wife. When Chang Fu-ying and Li Kuei-yung climbed into power and ousted Kuo Chuan-hai, Hua knew that it was extremely unfair and improper, but he said nothing about it.

Now, Hsiao stepped into the courtyard and found Hua's wife feeding a porker. Seeing him, she only nodded but did not invite him in. Embarrassed, Hua did, but under the circumstances Hsiao declined. He remained standing outside awhile, then walked off. When they had passed the elms in front of the house, Hsiao said to Hua, who was seeing him off:

"Old Hua, you shouldn't be ungrateful."

Hua mumbled:

"Oh, no. How could I?"

Back in the premises of the Peasants' Association, Hsiao pulled out of his brief case a roll of Party membership forms. He leafed through them till he came upon one sheet bearing the name of Hua Yung-hsi. He himself had recommended Hua for Party membership. The six-month probationary period was now well over, and Hua had not yet been considered for membership. Hsiao thought back to those days when Hua had distinguished himself in the battle with the bandits. It had been right to recommend him for Party membership then. Now, the gunner refused even to join in transport service. This was clearly a case of backsliding. He was going to propose at the coming Party members' small-group meeting that Hua's period of probation be prolonged. Still, he could not forget that at the beginning of the movement Hua had rendered good service, and he thought perhaps the widow was to blame for the gunner's backsliding. He must, therefore, gather more information and, if necessary, refer the matter to the higher-ups.

IV

AFTER holding a meeting to straighten out some wrong ideas and working methods, members of the land reform work team went to visit neighbouring villages. There were fifteen of them, and they were all energetic youngsters about twenty. Without stopping to eat, they set out on foot, each carrying on his back a small baggage-roll, braving wind and snow.

Team Leader Hsiao remained in Yuanmao with Wan. Being anxious to see Kuo Chuan-hai when he came back, Hsiao called twice at his stable of a house, but found the door locked. He asked the neighbours to tell Kuo to come and see him at the Peasants' Association as soon as he returned, then he walked back to the premises and found a big crowd waiting for him. Chang Ching-shui tore down the "No Admission" sign, and Old Sun immediately stepped to the door of the outer room and roughly yanked off the "Lecture Ground" notice, slung it into the yard and spat after it, but said nothing. He was working off his bitterness over the kick Chang Fu-ying had given him.



"Old Hua, you shouldn't be ungrateful."



The villagers were astir, as they had been a year before. Hsiao spoke to an audience of about one hundred and twenty poor peasants and farmhands, who were all eager to be up and doing once again. Hsiao explained the land reform law and the method of settling accounts with exploiters. All that week he met and talked with the villagers, studied their conditions, learned from them and told them what had been done in other villages. One day Old Chu, who had helped catch the landlord Han Number Six, declared with determination:

"We've done enough talking. Time we did something. No more shilly-shallying."

They all responded in a chorus:

"Right, right! Let's start at once. Let's go and look into the co-operative store, first of all."

Old Sun caught up:

"Catch that bastard, Chang Fu-ying, first."

Chang Ching-shui said with a smile:

"Still thinking of that kick? How revengeful!"

Standing in front of the *kang*, Hsiao called out:

"Quiet, please! We'll certainly get going, but we mustn't rush things. Whatever we do, we must have a nucleus to take the lead. I think, if we want to completely finish feudalism and stand up once and for all, we poor peasants and farmhands must unite and ally ourselves with the middle peasants. Suppose we establish a Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League?"

There was thunderous applause. "A good idea!" they all shouted. Meanwhile, somebody in the outer room exclaimed:

"There's Chairman Kuo!"

Everybody turned and looked. Kuo had appeared in the doorway of the outer room. He was in a tattered hare-skin cap, and his face was lean, haggard and red with cold. Standing on the threshold, he seemed to tower above the crowd. He was smiling and looking at Hsiao over the heads of the people in between. Hsiao called to him:

"Kuo, come on in."

Old Sun stepped forward and stretched out his arms to push back the crowd, shouting:

"Fall back. Fall back a little, please. Make way for Chairman Kuo."

Kuo approached through the lane, and Hsiao glanced at him. He was in a blue cotton-padded coat, torn from much working in the hills among trees, branches and twigs; the cotton showing through in innumerable places. In the distance he looked like a plant with white blossoms. Hsiao said with a smile:

"Kuo, what a beautiful coat you wear!"

He answered:

"In the village they've a name for it—a flowery coat."

Pai Yu-shan's wife standing by the *kang* put in:

"Take it off this evening, Kuo, and I'll patch it for you. I've got some blue cloth."

He answered with a smile, glancing at her:

"No, thanks. It's beyond mending. Too many holes. You wouldn't be able to mend it even if you worked all night."

A girl with two plaits, behind Mrs. Pai, interposed quickly:

"I'll help Mrs. Pai, and we'll promise to finish it tonight."

Kuo glanced at her, recognizing her as the child bride being brought up in the Tu family for one of their sons. She was not yet married, but waiting to be. Her name was Liu Kuei-lan. He did not say anything. The men near the *kang* made room for him, saying in chorus:

"Chairman Kuo, get on the *kang* and warm yourself."

On the *kang* Kuo sat by Hsiao. Leaning against the wall, they started chatting.

The poor peasants and farmhands organized themselves into a league, and the members pledged themselves to do their utmost to combat feudalism. They formed a presidium and elected Kuo as chairman of the Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League.

The meeting broke up at midnight and they went home. Hsiao sent Wan to Mrs. Pai's home with Kuo's worn-out cotton-padded coat and trousers to be mended. Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan, sitting on the *kang* at the low-legged table, set to work on the tattered clothes in the faint light of an oil lamp, sewing and chatting till cock-crow the next morning.

While his clothes were being mended by the two women, Kuo was lying naked underneath a brown army blanket given him by Hsiao. An all-night conversation was on between the two of them. This peasant youth was well acquainted with conditions in the village. He had a good memory and a heart in the right place. The oil

lamp on the table sputtered, because the oil was nearly finished; Hsiao poured fresh oil into it and raised the wick to give a brighter flame. He lay down again, pillowing his head on the edge of the *kang*, facing Kuo. He asked:

"Do you think the bad elements of this village have been uprooted?"

"They still have their roots in the earth."

"How about the two landlords, Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang?"

"They're down but not out."

"In other villages, landlords have surrendered their guns. Have you discovered weapons anywhere in this village?"

"Han Number Six had guns stowed away in several villages; they've been unearthed everywhere except in our village."

"Can his family in this village still have guns hidden away?"

"That can be figured out. When Han kept private guards, he had thirty-six guns of all sorts, which he had bought or seized from the surrendered Japanese military store. He had a Mauser too. When his bandit brother took to the mountains, he carried away about twenty of these guns; and when Long-neck Han and Li Ching-shan went up after the bandit chief, they took with them several more, including the Mauser. Now several guns have been found in neighbouring villages too; so there can't be many left."

"Has Snatcher Tang any guns?"

"He's one of those men who would jump into a well with silver ingots tied to their waist-bands sooner than give up their money. He wouldn't buy guns. Besides, he's a coward; the sight of a bayonet makes him tremble. . . ."

"Goodman Tu?"

"When the puppet Manchukuo was first established, he was made chief of the village self-defence corps—he may have had guns. I've heard elders say: 'Goodman Tu had guns in the old Chinese Republic days.' But none have been discovered."

Hsiao smiled. He liked such clear and detailed information. He thought awhile and commented:

"In this village there must still be hidden arms. As long as the landlords have guns, they have power. But at present we've no clue, and so must wait. If we search for weapons and fail to find them, that will have a bad effect on the villagers' morale. Mean-

while, we can go ahead with measures we are sure will succeed—wreck the landlords' finance and confiscate their riches." And he repeated what he had heard his team members say at a meeting: "It won't do to wish iron could turn into steel at once."

Kuo answered:

"No, it won't."

Hsiao asked:

"What sort of man do you think Chang Fu-ying is?"

"He used to be a landlord. When he got into power in the Peasants' Association, he made friends with those who knew how to please him. He listened to them. The gate of the Peasants' Association was thrown wide open to them. Li Kuei-yung is a bad egg, a toady; but he keeps behind the scenes. So people only know Chang to be bad, but they don't know much about this fellow. Chang is rotten outside while Li is rotten inside. Chang's mistress meets him every day in his office, while Li's woman stays at home. People who don't know this even say: 'Secretary Li is better in this way; he has nothing to do with loose women.'"

Hsiao asked:

"Who's Li's woman?"

"Han Number Six's concubine."

"I didn't see this fellow last year."

"Who? Li Kuei-yung? He wasn't here then. He came back this year."

"Where from?"

"Goodness knows. Some say he left the Kuomintang bandits in the south hills, some say he hailed from Changchun."

When he heard this, Hsiao raised himself on his left elbow and asked:

"Who told you?"

"Old Mrs. Wang of the east side told me. Li Kuei-yung often visits her, and he told her himself."

Hsiao got up, threw his overcoat over his shoulders, trimmed the lamp, sat by the table, pulled out a fountain pen and a notebook, and jotted down Kuo's last remarks. He had a good memory, but he always made a note of anything special, believing in the proverb: "A written record is better than trusting to memory." He got onto the *kang* again and asked Kuo, as if to remind him:

"Then would you say there are bad elements hidden in this village?"

While Hsiao was writing in his notebook, Kuo, who was sleepy, had dozed off. Now, he asked:

"What did you say?"

"Are there bandits lurking in this village?"

This time he got it. He opened his eyes and said:

"I suppose there may be."

He was awake again and listened as Hsiao spoke of the subversive activities of Japanese and Kuomintang spies, how they would shoot in the dark, poison food and water and spread rumours. Hsiao asked:

"Is there any rumour going round in this village?"

"The rumour that the 'Central Army' would be coming back has passed over. Some old men and women seem to be telling each other: 'The landlord Han's house-top is bursting into red flowers and the elms in his courtyard are in white bloom—this is a sign of an impending social change.' This rumour has spread far and wide."

"Who started it?"

"They say it was the concubine of Han Number Six."

"Li Kuei-yung's mistress, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Do many people believe the story?"

"Even Old Sun thought there's something in it."

"That I know. But I mean, do young men believe it as well as the old fellows? They do? Then we must look into the matter seriously. And I've also heard that since Big Li left for the front as a stretcher-bearer, the Peasants' Association has been without an officer in charge of anti-spy work. How can that do? While combating landlords, we must deal with spies. Landlords are open enemies, but spies—they are hidden and therefore all the more difficult to watch."

"Yes, that's true. As the proverb says: 'It is easy to dodge an open spear thrust, but difficult to guard against an arrow in the dark.'"

"In our fight against spies, we must also rely upon the masses. When you get them going and raise their class consciousness, there will be nothing the spies can do. To come back to the point, who do you think among the villagers is good enough to replace Big Li?"

Kuo thought awhile and answered:

"Chang Ching-shui, Chang Ching-hsiang's brother. I should say he is all right."

"Bring him to see me tomorrow."

The cock began crowing. The lamp was dim again for lack of oil, and Hsiao let it sputter out this time. The shadows paled and the frosted windows became slowly brighter. The sparrows began chirping below the eaves. Scarcely had Hsiao closed his eyes before he opened them again, remembering something urgent, and asked Kuo:

"Asleep?"

"Not yet."

"First thing in the morning, take over the guns from the five militiamen employed by Chang Fu-ying. Select some youngsters to be militiamen. Do you think Old Chu qualifies for chief?"

"We could try him."

Silence. Both fell to snoring. At dawn Wan went to Mrs. Pai's house for Kuo's clothes. When he came back, Hsiao and Kuo were still sound asleep.

The snow had stopped and the wind subsided, the sky was clearing up, and the first rays of the sun glittered on the windows. Sitting beside the window, on the *kang* in the west wing, Wan, the orderly, was cleaning a Mauser with a red silk rag, humming tunes of sorts. A long-faced short fellow was poking about in the courtyard. Wan called out, and the long face smiled and answered apologetically:

"I would like to see Team Leader Hsiao. My name is Li Kuei-yung."

Wan looked at him. He was dressed in a felt cap and a tattered coat and trousers. Wan asked:

"Are you Li Kuei-yung? He's sleeping."

Li went off, and Wan went on polishing and trilling. In a few minutes Old Sun popped in and Wan greeted him:

"Get on the *kang* and warm yourself."

Old Sun sat cross-legged on the *kang*, and asked with a smile:

"What was Li Kuei-yung doing here?"

For fun Wan fibbed:

"He came to accuse you."

Old Sun narrowed his left eye into a slit and said:

"Accuse me? I'm not afraid of him, not I. I never fawned on

Chang Fu-ying like he did. Chang got into the Peasants' Association and Li served as his secretary. Chang made love to Little Mi and Li was the go-between. He thought I was in the dark, but I knew all about it. I've seen the world, and I can put two and two together. When Chang and his gang were at the helm, they rallied around them landlords and riff-raff; even Goodman Tu and Snatcher Tang often visited the Peasants' Association. Poor men had no say whatever. The more honest a fellow was, the worse he suffered at their hands. Chang swaggered about with a knife in his belt, wearing leather boots which grated on the road. He looked for all the world like a Manchukuo police officer."

"Did Chang ever beat you?"

Being beaten was a face-losing business. Old Sun could not admit it. He said:

"How dare he?"

Wan, who knew the truth, called his bluff:

"They say he gave you a kick with his leather boot."

Old Sun fenced desperately:

"It's a whopping lie. Don't believe a word of it. Whoever dared do that to me? If anybody had done that, I would have told you long ago. To be beaten isn't a disgrace; to confess it is an honour."

Old Sun floundered awhile in his new vocabulary, which included words like "confess" and "honour," to the great amusement of Wan. The latter burst into loud laughter, and Hsiao woke up.

"Who's there? What are you laughing about?"

Wan answered:

"Old Sun is here."

"Ask him in."

Old Sun went into the room and sat down at the square table facing the *kang*. Hsiao and Kuo had got up. Kuo got into his coat and trousers and, without waiting for breakfast, left to take over the guns of Chang's guards. While washing his face, Hsiao chatted with Old Sun:

"How goes it with you, Old Sun?"

"So so. If I've not morsels of thick rice pudding, I've always mouthfuls of thin rice gruel."

"Driving a cart as usual?"

"What else could I do? The limbs want to rest, but the mouth wants to eat."

Hsiao wanted to know whether the villagers were satisfied with the division of land which had taken place the previous year.

"Old Sun, tell me, do you like your land?"

"Very much. Whatever is sown grows well."

Wan slipped in with a basin full of water, and, hearing this, burst out laughing again. The old man sat there with a long face, imagining that Li Kuei-yung had really accused him. He drew nearer to Hsiao and launched out:

"What did they come here for? To accuse me? I should be the one to accuse them. They've been cheating the authorities. Last year after you left the village, Team Leader, some officials from the county came to find out about the situation here. They wanted to have a talk with some villagers, but Chang Fu-ying said that all the villagers, except the old men and women, had gone down to the fields. The officials said: 'Well, ask the old folk to come.' Chang got hold of two: one blind old man, and one deaf old woman. The officials asked them: 'Are there any bad eggs in this village?' The deaf woman answered: 'We don't eat eggs, we live very simply.' They asked her some more questions, but she misunderstood every single one, until they didn't know whether to laugh or to curse. The blind old man told them: 'Comrades, she's hard of hearing. Ask me, please.' But at that point, Chang Fu-ying invited the officials to the west wing, where a feast was ready. Chang, Li and the village head Tang plied the officials with wine. And now they want to accuse me, do they? They've never done anything good themselves, yet they go about accusing people!"

Old Tien came to tell Hsiao it's lunch time, and asked Old Sun to join them. They had noodles. As Old Sun helped himself, he chatted and chuckled:

"This treat is most proper. Dumplings to see people off, and noodles to welcome them back."

Old Tien said:

"I made some money from a sale of fuel. My old woman suggested: 'We should invite Team Leader Hsiao to a meal. With him backing us, we feel safe, and those bad men will be shown up.'"

V

AT noon, a meeting of poor peasants and farmhands ended, and the men poured out into the street, one group bound east for Chang Fu-ying's co-operative store, one hurrying west to catch Chang himself.

The east detachment broke into the so-called co-operative store and ransacked the shelves, which were full of cosmetics: scented soap, perfume and lipsticks. Old Sun picked up a lipstick; twiddling it, sniffing at it, he queried:

"What can a peasant do with this thing?"

Old Chu advised wisely:

"Take it home, and let your old woman paint her lips with it."

Paying no attention to him, Old Sun went on:

"They don't sell bridles or halters. They sell such trinkets and call it a co-operative store, eh!"

Someone in the crowd added:

"This store has been catering to whores."

Then and there, the villagers started a meeting. Inside the co-operative and outside in the courtyard a shout went up:

"We must settle accounts with them!"

Kuo Chuan-hai sat upon the counter, silent, smoking his long pipe with the jade mouth-piece, watching the scene and listening to the animated discussion. In the din, Old Chu's voice boomed out above the rest:

"Do you call this a co-operative store? These fellows are selling cats in a bag. They think we're fools, don't they?"

Several peasants shouted simultaneously:

"Let's settle scores with them."

"Let them make good the losses they've caused us."

An old woman edged up to the counter and picked up a bundle of joss-sticks. She was putting it into her pocket when Old Chu stopped her:

"Don't touch anything. You mustn't take things away." He turned to the crowd, crying: "Let's all help pick up these things on the ground and put them back into the cupboards."

"Who has got paper? Let's make slips and seal up the chests and cupboards."

They all set to work collecting the goods, putting them in place

and sealing them up. Meanwhile, Old Sun posted himself beside a vat of wine, removed the lid, ladled up a dipperful and declared, narrowing his left eye:

"I want to see if it's been watered." With this, he poured the wine into a big bowl and began gulping it down mouthful after mouthful, bowl after bowl. He drank till his eyes were bloodshot, but failed to announce the result of his test.

Hsiao went up to Kuo and discussed with him the appointment of someone who was good at reckoning as an accountant to settle accounts with Chang Fu-ying. At this moment Chang Ching-shui and five new militiamen walked Chang, Li and Tang, all with their hands tied behind their backs, into the store. Full of alcohol, Old Sun pushed his way to the front and was quietly lifting his foot to kick his foe when Kuo cried out:

"None of that! Hasn't Team Leader Hsiao told us not to beat anybody?"

"But can't we beat up one or two bad eggs?"

Hsiao put in:

"No! Not even them."

Hsiao went on to explain the policy of leniency: except in dealing with the worst offenders, no corporal punishment was allowed if the wrong-doers confessed to their own crimes. He ordered the three men untied. He even allowed them to go home, to repent, to confess and to till the land. Some one in the crowd said:

"That's letting them off too lightly."

"Those bad eggs can take it easy, eh!"

Two women exchanged remarks in whispers:

"Chang may run away."

"He won't dare."

"Anyway, they should be watched, otherwise they may escape to the hills like Long-neck Han did last year and cause a lot of trouble."

Overhearing this last remark, Hsiao smiled at Chang Ching-shui, who was standing beside him, as much as to say: "You heard that, didn't you? This is your job." Chang Ching-shui smiled back understandingly. Hsiao turned to Chang Fu-ying:

"You had better admit your faults. Make a clean breast of everything, and ask the villagers' pardon."

Chang answered with an ugly grimace:

"What have I done wrong? They elected me chairman. And I always watched my step, was careful and conscientious, and did my duty according to the rules."

Old Sun was quick to throw in his face:

"Who elected you? Your friends and pals? You scratch my back and I scratch yours, eh? Your gang came together and had a good time, eating and drinking. Your guts were so greasy that you were afraid to cough. At whose expense did you enjoy yourselves so?"

From among the women clustered together on one side of the room stepped forth a girl of about sixteen, wearing two plaits—Liu Kuei-lan, the child bride being brought up in the Tu family. Flushed with excitement, she spoke swiftly, pointing a finger at Chang Fu-ying:

"You did nothing to help the families of soldiers and men who died for the revolution. What rules did you follow?"

Pale in the face, Chang Fu-ying could not answer. Old Chu pushed forward, lifted a fist, shook it under Chang's nose and boomed:

"One day in the seventh month, while we were working in the fields, you and Little Mi slunk into the hazel bushes and stayed there for a long while." He paused, because he could not help laughing, then went on: "What did you do in the bushes, the two of you?"

The villagers broke into peals of laughter and curses. Some wanted to string Chang and Little Mi up, some wanted to thresh them. Hsiao hastily stopped the villagers, and advised them to let Chang Fu-ying and the others go home, to give them an opportunity to think things over. Then he turned to speak to Chang Fu-ying:

"All right, you may go now. Later come back and make confessions. Dig up your stinking roots and ask the people to pardon you." Hsiao turned to Li Kuei-yung, who was hanging his head and looking sorry for himself:

"You, too, will have to admit your faults."

Li answered glibly, smiling hypocritically and bowing:

"Yes, yes, of course. When you've time, Team Leader Hsiao, I'd like to call on you and have a chat with you."

"Well, we'll arrange that later."

"All right. We'll go now, then."

As Li retreated, he inadvertently trod on Old Sun's straw-sandal with his leather shoe. The carter let out a roar, and Li made haste to offer apologies:

"I'm extremely sorry! I beg your pardon, uncle!"

Old Sun pushed him, shouting:

"Get out! You did many wrongs and gave me a treading on the toes. Get out, quick, this is no place for you to linger any moment. This place is ours, now."

After they were gone, Hsiao spoke to Chang Ching-shui in an undertone:

"Watch this Li fellow more carefully."

The villagers elected Kuo Chuan-hai, Old Sun and Old Chu members of the committee to investigate the property and accounts of the co-operative store and the bogus Peasants' Association. A smallpox physician in the village, who knew how to write and reckon on the abacus, was appointed secretary.

VI

THE membership of the Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League was extended to include peasant women. The Women's Association, organized by Little Mi and dominated by her gang of bad women, was now as good as dissolved. Little Mi dared not show herself outside and stayed indoors all day long—she took to chopping fuel, cutting straw, mending clothes, making shoes. She pretended to be honest, and her honest husband was taken in by her. He went about telling everybody that his wife had changed.

The partition between the two rooms of the west wing of the Peasants' Association was taken down, and poor peasants and farmhands gathered there daily. Here Hsiao spoke to them several times about the policy towards middle peasants. All day every day, except during meal times, this enlarged room was filled to overflowing. In the middle was a fire of dried twigs. From the beam hung a big bean-oil lamp with four wicks which lit up the whole room at night. The peasants sat around the fire, smoking, coughing and arguing. The room was murky and reeked of tobacco. For five days, the conference had been going on. Finally, Old Chu, having sat out his patience, exclaimed:

"We've had enough of talking. All landlords are devils. We peasants shouldn't hum and haw—but act."

All the others supported him unanimously. The members of the presidium laid their heads together, and agreed to act that very night, to launch a general offensive against feudal elements. Women and children were to join in.

"Are middle peasants to join also?" somebody asked.

The room buzzed with discussion. Kuo stood high upon the *kang*, crying:

"Quiet, please! Listen to me. Middle peasants may join if they like, but we shan't force them to."

Fearing that the news might leak out, Kuo suggested that they set out at once. Just then Old Chu's powerful voice was heard:

"Chairman Kuo, I've something urgent to say! A bad egg is spying on us; may we arrest him?"

"If you're sure he's a bad egg and is spying, arrest him by all means."

Old Chu and Chang Ching-shui pushed their way through the throng, ran into a dark corner of the outer room, and laid their hands on a man. He was dressed in rags, with a straw-rope for belt. He was a rich landlord named Chang Chung-tsai, Goodman Tu's cousin. Old Chu seized him by his collar and dragged him into the light, cursing him the while:

"You—spy! You—bastard!"

The peasants flew into a fury at the sight of a landlord spying. How dare a landlord smuggle himself into the Peasants' Association now! They clustered around him, squeezing, pushing and shouting:

"You spied on us, you wanted to play us a dirty trick."

"Want to come out on top again?"

"Who sent you here?"

"He is a landlord himself."

"All landlords are bad eggs."

"He deserves a hiding."

"He's silent, pretending to be a fool."

The villagers were working themselves into a greater fury. They remembered dressing-down was prohibited by Team Leader Hsiao, but their hands itched uncomfortably. Standing upon the *kang* in the lamplight, Team Leader Hsiao was frowning at them

warningly. Their itching hands could not be raised—they vented their anger in slogans:

“Don’t let a single landlord off!”

“Down with feudalism!”

“Smash all feudal powers!”

“Break them financially! Break them politically! Seize their arms!”

The south *kang* and the north *kang* vied with each other in shouting the slogans, which echoed and re-echoed. The sparrows in their nests under the eaves were frightened into sudden flight, causing an icicle hanging on the rafter to snap and drop on the window-ledge with a tinkle.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Kuo. “Another spy?”

They rushed out and searched all over the place—not a shadow of a man was found. Slowly walking back into the room, they resumed their discussion. Hsiao said with a smile:

“It was all to the good. We must always be on the alert.”

They pushed out the spying landlord Chang Chung-tsai.

At the square table Kuo Chuan-hai, Chang Ching-shui, Old Chu and Old Sun together made out lists of names of activists to form twenty groups to lead the villagers to take stock of and take over landlords’ land holdings and property. When they finished, the cock in the courtyard was crowing for the third time and the first rays of the sun were shining.

Pai Yu-shan’s wife and Liu Kuei-lan fished out of a red-lacquered trunk in the east room a red silk flag. This flag had flown on the roof of the gateway of the Peasants’ Association the year before, but it was discarded after Chang Fu-ying got into the Association. Now the two women tied it to a pole and hoisted it onto the roof of the north wing. The roof, ground, hayricks, maize crates—all were white with snow; but the flag looked from a distance like a flame leaping up from a silvery world.

Without stopping to breakfast, the members of the twenty groups set out in different directions to take over the landlords’ houses.

Kuo told Old Chu to lead the militiamen, armed with guns and spears, to patrol the village. Kuo and his group went to take over Goodman Tu’s property. There were twenty people in his group, including two women and a boy. The boy was no other than the

Little swineherd Wu, who stamped behind Kuo in the new cotton-padded shoes made by Mrs. Chao, carrying in his hand an iron poker. One of the women was Mrs. Pai; the other Liu Kuei-lan. Her husband-to-be was only ten, while she was seventeen, slim and tall, with an oval face rosy as a ripe apple. She was the poor peasant Liu Yi-lin's daughter. Her mother had died long ago. Her father owed money to the Tu family, and, unable to pay it, was forced on the eve of his death to sell his only daughter to the Tu family, who destined her for their son. Chang Fu-ying as chairman of the Peasants' Association protected the landlords, and the Tu family were related to Goodman Tu who had Chang Fu-ying's support. Thus they formed a powerful gang, and could do as they pleased. The unwedded wife did not sleep with her husband—a boy scarcely ten years of age. She shared the north *kang* with her mother-in-law while he shared the south *kang* with his father. One night, her mother-in-law called her up to massage her father-in-law. Liu Kuei-lan flared up, saying this wouldn't be proper. The old lady said nothing about it then, but the next morning she accused the girl of stealing an egg. Wronged, the girl cried and appealed to the Women's Association; but Little Mi said that Liu Kuei-lan's father-in-law was a good man, and would not believe her story. She sent her home. That very night, it was raining hard and the room was pitch dark, when she heard somebody climb onto the *kang*, and in the next instant a man had thrown himself upon her, pinning her down so that she could scarcely breathe. She cried out. At this juncture, her little husband woke up with a start, looked for his father but found him missing. Frightened, he leaped off the *kang*, thinking a fire had broken out or bandits had raided the village. He ran barefoot to the table and groped for a match. His mother then jumped off the *kang*, ran to him and slapped him across the face. He collapsed on the edge of the south *kang*, whimpering. Disturbed and interrupted, his father loosed his hold of Liu Kuei-lan, who tore herself free and ran barefoot out into the courtyard. There she stood in the rain, up to her ankles in mud, listening to the distant howling of wolves. Drenched, cold and fearful, she asked herself: "Where shall I go?" Her parents were dead, and she had no home. Little Mi was in charge of the Women's Association. She had no place to go to. She clambered up the maize crate under the eaves of the east wing, laid herself

down on the grain and wept for the rest of the night. The neighbours did not hear her sobs, which were drowned by the rain.

At dawn she got down and ran out barefoot into the street. Before she had gone very far, she came upon Mrs. Pai drawing water from the roadside well. Mrs. Pai was surprised to see her limping along barefoot, her eyes swollen and red. She asked:

"What's the matter with you, Liu Kuei-lan?"

Liu Kuei-lan burst into tears, unable to speak. Carrying a pail of water, Mrs. Pai took the girl home with her. She gave her some fresh clothes to change into, and made her wash her feet and lie down on the *kang*. While cooking, she asked the girl about her trouble. Liu Kuei-lan told her, bursting into tears at the most distressing point. Mrs. Pai comforted her:

"Don't cry. Stay on here with me, and no one can do you any more harm."

Since then, Liu Kuei-lan had stayed with Mrs. Pai, who gave her some needlework to do, and did not let her go out of doors lest she might be seen by her mother-in-law. Nevertheless, after a month, the Tu family came to know of her whereabouts. But they dared not go to fetch her away from Mrs. Pai. They asked the Women's Association to intervene, and Little Mi sent down to urge Mrs. Pai to give up the girl. Mrs. Pai told the messenger:

"Ask Little Mi to come here, I would like a talk with her."

Afraid that Mrs. Pai might make public her guilty secret, Little Mi dared not go. The Tu family appealed to Chang Fu-ying, and Chang Fu-ying announced that he was sending his militiamen for the girl. This enraged Mrs. Pai, who posted herself in the middle of the highway, arched her black eyebrows disdainfully and declared at the top of her voice:

"I am keeping Liu Kuei-lan in my house. Come and take her if you dare. I'm ready for you. I know what you've been doing. Don't think I don't know."

Chang Fu-ying was furious, and wanted to accept Mrs. Pai's challenge; but Li Kuei-yung cautioned him against making an enemy of a government worker's wife. It would not do to offend her and attract the attention of the district authorities; it would not do to play with fire. He said:

"Wash your hands of this matter. That Pai woman is a shrew, don't you know?"

In the last resort, the Tu family approached their relative, Goodman Tu. The landlord, wearing a pair of spectacles, was reading *The Northeast China Daily*, which he often read in order to study the policy of the government and to take stock of the military situation. He was reading about the winter offensive launched by the People's Liberation Army which was annihilating Chiang Kai-shek's troops, division after division. His relatives chose this moment to come and ask his help to retrieve Liu Kuei-lan. Goodman Tu said with a sigh:

"Ah! Let's make arrangements later on."

Liu Kuei-lan stayed on with Mrs. Pai. Her ten-year-old husband came several times to beg her with tears to go back. He was small, lean and wizened, and spoke with a perpetual stammer. When Liu Kuei-lan wanted to speak to him, she had to bend her head.

The villagers remembered that when she first went to the Tu family, all the neighbours had shaken their heads over the match. Old Sun predicted: "This daughter-in-law isn't there to stay. She's sure to kick over the traces sooner or later." Strong and healthy, Liu Kuei-lan was a quick worker, who handled the sickle and scissors equally well. She was equal to any man in scything, weeding, threshing or pushing a grindstone. Now, as she looked down at the small, tearful boy who was her "husband," for a moment her heart seemed melting. But she felt disgusted at the thought of his father, and told the boy to go home alone. She stayed on with Mrs. Pai. After Team Leader Hsiao returned to the village, Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan joined the Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League, enrolling in Kuo Chuan-hai's group. Now, they were going to the house of Goodman Tu.

Old Sun, a member of the same group, was some distance behind, driving a two-horse sledge on which the landlord's grain and furniture were to be loaded for removal to the Peasants' Association.

They found the gate of the Tu house bolted tight. Old Sun reined in his horses, ran to the gate and knocked at it with the stick of his whip. A woman's voice on the other side asked:

"Who's there?"

"A relative of the family," lied Old Sun. "Open the door." He inclined his head to whisper to Kuo:

"Goodman Tu's wife."

Having worked once in this house, Old Sun remembered that

there were two big dogs inside. So at the sound of the bolt being pushed back, he immediately withdrew behind the others, in great fear. As the door opened, two fierce dogs rushed out, howling and snarling, from behind a fat woman. One made for Kuo, the other for Old Sun, who immediately turned ashen. Swinging his whip, he glared at the dog and shouted:

"Dare you come near me? Dare you. . . !"

Nothing daunted, the dog lunged forward, and Old Sun timidly retreated; then he quickly and bravely took two steps forward, and the dog took two steps backward. His presence of mind saved him: he squatted down and made as if to pick up a stone; whereupon the dog turned and picked the swineherd Wu as a new objective. Old Sun straightened up and wiped his sweating forehead. Before the colour was back in his cheeks, his tongue was already wagging again:

"I knew you dared not come near me."

The dog suddenly sank its fangs into Wu's leg, biting a hole in his padded trousers and breaking the boy's skin. In a fury the villagers pursued the dogs with spears, rods and stones, and the dogs ran howling about the courtyard, unable to get into the house because all the doors were shut. The men finally succeeded in cornering the animals and tying them up. Now, Old Sun called his loudest:

"Kill the curs, don't let them escape!"

They decided to hang the two dogs, and strung them up in the stable.

They caught all the fowl and shoved them, flapping their wings, into the coops. The horses were chewing the cud. There was no more violence anywhere in the house. Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan gathered all the women and children of the Tu family in the east wing. The women sat cross-legged on the *kang*, staring at the villagers who moved in and out of the room, and simpering or hanging their heads whenever the villagers looked at them. Soon the room was filled to overflowing, and Goodman Tu's grandson started crying with fright. His grandma, Goodman Tu's wife, lean and wrinkled as a monkey, took him up in her arms and coaxed him:

"Don't cry! What's the use, crying so? It'll only make your head ache."

Meanwhile, the swineherd Wu in the outer room cried:



Her ten-year-old husband came several times to
beg her with tears to go back.

"Neighbours, make way, please. Make way for the God of Wealth!"

All eyes were turned on Goodman Tu. He was in a faded brown felt cap and a black, patched and repatched cotton-padded gown, the top of which was bulging out. When Wu unbuttoned the landlord's long gown to expose a silk fox-fur coat underneath, Tu hung his head. His felt cap slipped down his forehead over his black tooth-brush eyebrows. Wu brandished his spear and urged the landlord:

"Tell us, quick, where you've hidden your valuables."

Goodman Tu looked up. His face was as plump as ever, his eyes were two slits, and his temples were sprinkled with grey. He answered with an artificial smile:

"We've nothing valuable left."

Old Sun stepped up and said, pointing a finger at Tu's nose:

"In this and other villages, this and other counties, you have more than ten thousand *mou* of land, and the rent is enough to coin a big gold Buddha. You can't say you've no gold simply because we don't know yet where you've hidden it."

"I swear I haven't any. If I had, I would have handed it over long ago. I'd have counted it an honour to be able to contribute something to the people. And what use is gold? Now the Eighth Route Army is in power, I couldn't have spent the money, anyway, with everybody watching me."

Goodman Tu pretended to cry as he spoke, and in the narrow eyes, embedded in fat, there actually glittered two tears. The women were taken in, and gazed sympathetically at his patched gown and his grey temples. They ceased to question him and were about to leave him alone. At this juncture, Kuo arrived and understood the situation at a glance. The hypocrite had been playing on the women's soft-heartedness, and successfully! Kuo took from his mouth the stemmed pipe with the jade bowl and stuck it in his waist-band. He leaped upon the *kung* and boomed:

"Don't listen to him! Every landlord is a great hypocrite. This one sheds crocodile tears to make you pity him—but what are his two tears to the ocean of tears we poor villagers have shed all these years? I remember the day when my father was dying—it was snowing and my father was groaning, not yet dead, but the landlord Han Number Six ordered my father put out of doors. This land-

lord Tu was there too, and he supported Han, saying: 'Drag him out quick. Don't let the stink of a dying man linger in the room to contaminate the whole household.' Then they carried my dad out, and he was frozen to death outside the gate."

Liu Kuei-lan was glancing at Kuo as she listened to him. Her eyes were dim with tears, and she wiped them with the back of her hand.

Mrs. Pai glared at Tu and reproached him: "You ground us down then, and now you want us to pity you, eh!"

Old Tien caught up: "It's true, Old Kuo was thrown out of doors and left to freeze to death in the snow. If he had been allowed to stay in his room, he might have lived. We must avenge the Kuo family."

Kuo said:

"It's not only avenging us Kuos—a landlord is the enemy of us all. Like a grindstone, a landlord grinds poor men wherever he turns."

Old Sun, standing at the door, put in:

"Every landlord is a public enemy. I remember, in 1945 I hauled logs and fuel for him from the hills. Day and night I worked. One night, scarcely had I lain down to rest when Goodman Tu barged in and shouted: 'Get up, you lazy devil! How can you sleep so early? Go and water the horses, they are dying of thirst.'"

Mrs. Pai joined in the accusation:

"I heard Pai say. . . ." Pai Yu-shan's wife, imitating the government workers, now called her husband "Pai" instead of "my husband." "This man Tu has the face of a Buddha but the heart of a devil, like that Han Number Six. One day, Pai asked him for a loan. Goodman Tu said: 'No, no. It's no use offering me fifty per cent interest; I couldn't lend you anything even at eighty per cent interest.' Pai went off, but, as he passed through the kitchen, Tu's second daughter-in-law called to him like a shameless hussy: 'Pai Yu-shan, if you fetch me some fuel, I'll lend you some money.' But she demanded an interest of sixty per cent, and would accept nothing less. We had to take it on her terms, because that winter the north wind was cold enough to freeze the marrow in your bones, and we had to borrow money to make cotton-padded clothes or else froze to death."

Now all the peasants remembered old wrongs. They poured out their grievances, cursed and wanted to beat the landlord.

"Everybody knows about the landlords' crimes."

"All landlords are bad eggs."

"Team Leader Hsiao says that landlords hide things in all sorts of places."

Somebody suddenly squeezed to the front, snatched Tu's felt cap off his head and put it playfully on his own. Meanwhile, Tu's bare scalp, bald and shiny, was oozing with beads of sweat. He looked quite frightened. Kuo said to him:

"Goodman Tu, don't be afraid. We're not going to beat you. Only you must tell us straight out where you've stowed your valuables."

A militiaman interposed:

"A landlord has no sense of decency; he'll have to be beaten."

He lifted a fist, but Kuo leaped down and stopped him, saying:

"Don't! Beating is no part of the policy of the Communist Party." He turned to Tu: "Goodman Tu, where's your gold? Tell us."

Team Leader Hsiao had come and had been watching the proceedings from the doorway, looking over the shoulders of the crowd at Goodman Tu and noting the expression on that big round face. Hsiao had seen the effect of the landlord's crocodile tears on the women and how Kuo's intervention had opened their eyes. He had also seen that although the villagers were thoroughly aroused, Kuo had the situation well in hand, and was averting any tendency to violence. Sure that nothing untoward could happen and that this group could be trusted to carry on, he walked off to see how things were going with the other groups.

Meanwhile, seeing that Kuo had forbidden the peasants to beat him, Goodman Tu thought that he had won over his enemies' leader, and he made haste to say ingratiatingly: "Chairman Kuo. . . ."

Old Sun cut him short, saying:

"He's not *your* chairman; he's chairman of our Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League."

Goodman Tu thereupon started all over again:

"League Chairman Kuo, all I have is here, as you can see; and I swear there is nothing else. If I had anything else, I would hand it over and think it a great honour to do so."

Kuo knocked the bowl of his pipe against his shoe, and answered with a smile:

"With ten thousand *mou* of land, how can you have nothing? Whom do you think you're fooling?"

Goodman Tu raised his eyes and said:

"Haven't I handed over property twice already?"

Old Sun threw in:

"What sort of property did you hand over? The first time, you parted with three leather halters and a lame horse, and refused to add anything else. The second time, with Chang Fu-ying backing you up, you produced two bed sheets smelling of a baby's shit and got by again. Not an ounce of your hoarded gold has yet been seen; where is it? We know all about your property. Do you think we don't use our eyes?"

Kuo said deliberately:

"If you persist in your game, we won't beat you, but we can put you behind the bars."

The villagers, hearing this, felt reassured. Now they were all agog. Old Sun pursued:

"Tie him up, then, and coop him up for a couple of days." A militiaman got ready with the rope, and the swineherd Wu gave Goodman Tu a shove in his fleshy back, saying:

"You dirty old scoundrel! If you don't confess, you'll be locked up."

Meanwhile, Goodman Tu's wife and grandson on the south *kang* suddenly burst out crying, adding to the noise and confusion. The landlord folded both his hands upon his belly and, more sticky beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead, called out to his family:

"Don't cry, please. While you cry, I don't know what to do."

Wu gave Tu another shove, saying:

"Get a move on. No more nonsense! You owe us poor men innumerable debts of blood, yet you play the poor man now!"

The militiaman added:

"As a Manchukuo official, you murdered poor people and got away with it. Our sweat flowed in a stream. At that time you knew what to do; now you don't know what to do, eh!"

Old Sun put in again:

"When you were a Manchukuo official, you ordered me about. I slaved for you, getting up when the cock crowed and stopping work

only when you lighted the lamp. I came back from the fields tired out, yet I had to cut straw, feed the horses, fetch water and fuel for your daughters-in-law, and empty the night-pot for your woman. When I broke down and lay ill, and wanted some rice gruel, you refused me and swore at me: 'Ill—is he? Serves him right.' Now, you're flustered, and I say it serves you right."

Wu cried impatiently:

"Have him locked up at once!"

Goodman Tu wiped his sweating forehead and stuttered:

"Don't push me, and I'll tell you. I'll tell you!"

Kuo signed to the villagers to keep still. The militiamen urged:

"Be quiet, all of you, and hear out what he has to say."

Inside the house and out in the courtyard, everybody became so quiet that the only sound to be heard was the twittering of sparrows under the eaves. Goodman Tu drew a deep breath, glanced around and headed for the south *kang*. The villagers made way for him. He sat down on the edge of the *kang* and, when he had recovered his breath, said slowly:

"What do you want me to say? Really, I've got nothing." At this, the peasants could no longer control their anger, and they surged towards the south *kang*. Wu gave Goodman Tu a push, saying:

"Get up. You're not allowed to sit."

Pushing and elbowing, the peasants propelled the landlord back to the doorway. Old Sun exclaimed:

"I've been clenching my fist so tightly, it's wringing wet!"

One of the militiamen cried, shaking his rifle:

"None of the pot-bellies is any good. The only way to loosen his tongue is by threshing him."

Once again all the landlord's women on the south *kang* started wailing, and his grandson joined in the chorus.

This time, Kuo lost his temper and shouted at them:

"What are you crying for? Nobody's hit him."

Old Sun added:

"You may cry your worst, but he's got to pay back all he owes us." A militiaman followed up:

"This is just a trick; but we're not going to be taken in by it."

Goodman Tu clasped his hands before his chest, and implored them:

"Good neighbours, have pity for Buddha's sake, if not for mine!"

His eyes fell on a brass Buddha on a red-lacquered trunk in the corner of the room. The image stood over two feet high, its face wreathed in smiles and its hands folded as if in prayer, watching the world with glittering eyes. Old Sun jerked up his head, looked at the smiling Buddha, and flew into a fury! He remembered, in the winter of 1945, when he was a groom in Tu's house, a mare had thrown a foal in the stable. It was snowing and blowing that day, and the little thing died before it was taken to a warmer place. Goodman Tu called Old Sun inside, and made him kneel down before this brass Buddha. The master boomed angrily:

"You've caused the death of a living creature and offended Buddha. What are you going to do about it?"

Kneeling, Old Sun answered:

"What do you think I should do?"

"You say."

"Well, I'll burn a joss-stick to Buddha and kowtow."

"If that's all, you go on kneeling."

Old Sun stayed rooted to the ground till midday, when Goodman Tu walked into the room again, his hands folded behind his back, and bent his head to ask:

"What do you say now?"

His knees benumbed and painful, Old Sun mumbled:

"I'll do whatever you say."

"I'll take your word for it. Put your finger-print on this."

Goodman Tu held out a copybook, and Old Sun stamped his right thumb on a page on which it was written: "Old Sun caused the death of a foal and offended Buddha. He will go without three months' wages to buy a piece of red silk to present to Buddha."

And here was that Buddha again! Fuming with rage, Old Sun picked up an elm rod and gave the Buddha a resounding whack on the head. Others followed suit, and together they hammered at the glittering Buddha until it was battered completely out of shape.

"Landlords, gods and devils—they were all out to deceive us," said Old Sun in conclusion.

Meanwhile Kuo and several activists had been conferring in low voices in the outer room. Now they returned to the inner room, and Kuo said to the peasants: "Hold on, there! Stop hitting that thing. Goodman Tu still refuses to confess; what do you think we should do with him?"

Old Sun proposed with a wink:

"Landlords' pates are as hard as dried elm and wet willow. We can't hack his head open, but we can have Tu put behind bars."

A militiaman said:

"Let's give him a thorough threshing before we send him off."

Kuo went into the kitchen to light his pipe, came back and said:

"We can't beat him, but we can settle accounts with him. Wu, you run and fetch the smallpox physician."

Carrying a spear, Wu was squeezing his way out of the room, when Kuo called after him:

"Tell him to bring an abacus."

In a few minutes Wu was back with the dark, skinny, spectacled smallpox physician.

"Make way, there, folks," said Kuo. "We're going to settle accounts with the God of Wealth."

An activist said:

"Goodman Tu, tell us quick where you've put your gold. When we've figured out how much you owe us, you'll have to pay us back every cent."

"It's no use. I've no gold."

The smallpox physician pushed his glasses up on his forehead, placed his abacus under Goodman Tu's nose, and rattled the sliding balls with his fingers. Kuo said:

"Setting aside what you made in rent, we'll just figure out how much you made at the expense of your farm labourers. On the average, every year, you hired thirty labourers. Every labourer was able to work fifty *mou*, right?"

Many voices answered together:

"Yes, fifty *mou*."

Old Sun added:

"With a horse, yes."

Kuo continued:

"One labourer's food and wages cost you the produce of ten *mou*. The upkeep of one horse took the produce of another ten *mou*."

Old Sun said:

"Less."

"Let's reckon the most it could cost. The tax to the government and other expenses accounted for ten *mou*. With thirty *mou*

gone, your net profit was twenty *mou*'s produce. You figure it out on your abacus, Uncle Black." Kuo called the physician Uncle Black because his face, hands and feet were black. This Uncle Black, pushing his glasses higher on his forehead, began manipulating the abacus and reported:

"Ten *mou* yields five piculs of grain, so every year he gets ten piculs out of every farmhand. He hired thirty men—multiply thirty by ten, and the total is three hundred piculs."

Kuo said:

"He has been a landlord for thirty years, hiring at least thirty farmhands every year. Uncle Black, please tell us how much he owes us. In the past, when we borrowed money from him, he demanded an interest of fifty per cent or sixty per cent. We don't demand such a high interest from him, say, we want only thirty per cent. Figure out how much he owes us, Uncle Black, capital and interest."

Nobody said a word while the smallpox physician was manipulating the abacus. All was quiet except for the pit-a-pat of the abacus balls. Able to use the abacus himself, Goodman Tu knew with trepidation what was coming. His face turned pale, and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. The physician announced:

"Without counting the interest over the last thirty years, he owes us nine thousand piculs of grain."

As this figure was announced, a buzz of excited comment broke out, and the peasants pressed forward towards Goodman Tu. The landlord's grandson cried again, and his grandmother coaxed him:

"Don't cry, baby. Granny's here."

Goodman Tu stood speechless in the midst of the crowd. They shouted:

"Speak up! Are you dumb?"

"Look at him! Like a bundle of straw!"

"Make him give us back the grain! Never mind about the interest just now. First return us nine thousand piculs. We're short of grain at the moment."

"A debt must be paid to the last cent. Isn't that the landlords' law?"

"Remember how heartless the landlords were in the Manchukuo days! A labourer worked all the year round, but when he went home at New Year he had no mat on the *kang*, no rice in the pot,

while in the landlord's house the smell of pork, chicken and dumplings filled the courtyard, and the noise of preparations for a feast could be heard in the street. Dumplings floated up in the pot like white flowers. They ate while we starved. When a poor peasant asked for a loan of yellow rice, the landlord's bodyguard pushed and shooed him out, shouting: 'Go away, go away. At this time of year, the landlord has no yellow rice to spare.' In those days we wept and thought it was our bad luck. How could we have imagined that the landlords were in our debt?"

Men and women, young and old, contributed their comments, till the whole room buzzed, and every voice was drowned by the general din. Then, Kuo shouted at the top of his voice:

"Quiet, please! We're after the landlord's wealth in order to claim back what he owes us, what he made out of our sweat and blood. It's wealth coming home to its rightful owners. What labour has created must be given back to the labourers—houses, grain, silver and gold ingots and all."

The whole house resounded with thunderous applause:

"Right you are. It must all come back to its rightful owners."

Kuo said to the physician hoarsely:

"You figure out whether the things in this house are enough to pay his debts."

"No need to figure. Far from enough."

"Since he can't pay us, we'll take over his house," declared Kuo. "It's our house now, and we can make a thorough search. Search carefully and slowly—don't break mirrors and windowpanes, they're our own property. Just a minute. How shall we deal with the landlord himself?"

Somebody shouted:

"Send him off to join Han Number Six in his grave."

Kuo shook his head:

"No, he isn't a criminal landlord, he hasn't committed any murders."

Another man said:

"Throw him into the street, how about that?" "Put him in the penthouse first." The militiamen herded Goodman Tu and his family into the penthouse. The poor peasants started a search.

Some searched, some made an inventory and some sealed up the property already examined. Cases and trunks were ransacked. The

flower-patterned paper on the ceiling was pierced through here and there with spears. Standing on a red-lacquered cupboard, one man thrust his head into the space between the roof and the ceiling, bringing down a cloud of dust. Mats and sheets on the *kang* were lifted aside. The floor was littered with papers and rags.

Kuo said:

"Fetch Goodman Tu. Let's question him again." He turned to Pai Yu-shan's wife: "Mrs. Pai, will you and 'she' please go to the west wing to ask the landlord's women where the treasure is."

Turning to go, Mrs. Pai asked Kuo in jest:

"Who's 'she'?"

Kuo blushed, as if he had done something unpardonable. Tongue-tied, he hurried into the throng, then went off with the swineherd Wu to pry into every hole and corner with his iron poker. Mrs. Pai tugged at Liu Kuei-lan's sleeve and said teasingly: "Come on, you 'she'; let's go to the west wing." Liu Kuei-lan turned quite red in the face.

Goodman Tu was led into the east wing, where he was immediately surrounded by the crowd. The militiamen demanded:

"Bring out your gold, quickly!"

Old Sun said:

"I was once your hired labourer, I saw what you had. If you refuse to give up your gold, it'll be all the worse for you."

Goodman Tu parried:

"You have searched all my cases and trunks. What has been left unturned?"

Old Sun stepped nearer and said:

"That glittering yellow gold, that white silver—where have you hidden it? Tell us, quick."

"What glittering gold do I have? Look at those rags." Pointing at the rags scattered about the room, Goodman Tu added: "Does this look like a house with gold? Gold can't be hidden from the public eye."

Old Sun persisted:

"All the women in your house have gold rings. Your second daughter-in-law has gold ear-rings. Your first daughter-in-law has a pair of gold bracelets weighing four ounces. Your wife has gold hair-pins, gold plaques, gold watches, gold bricks. Hand them over at once. Otherwise, you will have no end of trouble."

This circumstantial account made Goodman Tu hang his head. But in another instant he looked up and said:

"I sold all those things long ago. In the Manchukuo days we were very badly off and things cost more from year to year. Money ran out like water, like a flood over wasteland."

The militiaman flared up:

"Don't listen to him. All landlords are glib talkers. Have him locked up."

The furious crowd pushed Goodman Tu towards the door. As he waddled off, he turned and implored them: "Listen to me, please."

Old Sun growled:

"What! Listen to you? These men aren't your grandchildren. As for me, I'm fifty-one and I'll be fifty-two next year. Why should we listen to you?"

The peasants who heard Old Sun broke into peals of laughter. Meanwhile, Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan had not got very far in trying to make the women confess.

Kuo stepped into the east wing and beckoned to Goodman Tu: "Come with me. This way."

Kuo led Tu in and out of the house, with a crowd of curious spectators in tow. Kuo made the landlord work, ordering him to move a trunk to the yard, to carry a case into the house, to shift this and lift that. Tu panted and perspired, his round fleshy face flushed and greasy. Iron poker in hand, Kuo told him with a smile:

"You owe us a debt, but you refuse to hand over your gold, so we're asking you to work for us. Formerly we worked for you. How do you like working for a change?"

As he spoke, Kuo watched Tu closely. The landlord seemed quite happy to work as a porter so long as he didn't have to give up his gold. He was really exerting himself. Presently, however, when Kuo told him to lift a vat of kitchen-wash, he looked reluctant and said:

"That dirty slop? It stinks. Why move it?"

Kuo snapped:

"Come on, quick. Do as you're told."

Goodman Tu pretended to push and strain, whereas actually he was making no effort at all—the vat did not budge. This made Kuo suspicious. With the help of two militiamen, he lifted the vat to one side. Where it had stood, they saw a patch of earth which

seemed to have been disturbed recently. Kuo kicked it with the tip of his shoe. It was frozen. Goodman Tu forced a smile and said:

"Don't bother with that. There is nothing there."

Looking over his shoulder, Kuo saw that the landlord's big round face had paled. He asked with a smile:

"Is there really nothing there, underneath?"

Goodman Tu smiled, thinking he was nearly over the worst.

"May lightning strike me dead if there's anything I'm holding back!" The militiaman stirred the wash with a stick, until the dirty water and scum slopped over the edge of the vat. There was a metallic sound, as his stick struck something! He rolled up a sleeve, thrust his right arm into the water and fished up a brass basin. They emptied the vat, but found nothing more. Goodman Tu smiled triumphantly: "You don't believe me, but I've really nothing left. I'll give this brass basin to the Peasants' Association."

Kuo stood on one side, knitting his brows in thought. After pacing to and fro, he returned to that suspicious-looking spot and poked it with the iron poker, but it was frozen hard. He found a spade in a lumber-room, and began digging. In a few minutes the spade struck something metallic, producing a clang! Old Sun, who had squeezed through the crowd, exclaimed:

"We've found the gold!"

Everybody rushed into the kitchen to watch. Even those who had been told to keep an eye on the landlord's family deserted their posts. Kuo was soon surrounded by a big crowd. As he dug away, clods of earth and icicles flew up into the faces of the lookers-on, but they did not mind in the least.

When a hole one foot deep and three feet wide had been dug, a militiaman bent down and raised a tin lid. Underneath appeared a layer of planks! He removed the planks, and there yawned the dark mouth of a cellar, out of which issued a gush of cold wind. The little swineherd Wu struck a match, but the wind blew it out. He lighted a bundle of sticks and put them slowly into the mouth. Now they could see trunks and bags piled in a murky mass. Old Sun let himself down into the pit, and soon called out from below: "Plenty of trunks! Come on, another man." His voice sounded muffled, as if from inside a big jar. A militiaman leaped down to join him, and together they began hoisting up trunks and sacks—there were more than thirty altogether. The peasants knocked these

open and the contents spilled out—suit-lengths of silk, bolts of satin, woollen and velvet materials, furs of all varieties and beaver caps. There were over a thousand feet of blue cloth too.

Old Sun and the militiaman clambered out of the hole, smeared with dirt and mud. The old man, dusting himself with a rag, commented:

"All good things!" Turning to Goodman Tu, he asked:

"Your wealth was washed away, eh!"

Dumbfounded, Goodman Tu walked dejectedly into the east wing, sat down on the edge of the south *kang* and hid his face in his hands. His wife hobbled out in the outer room, leaning on a cane, whimpering:

"Have mercy on us, and leave us something!"

Old Sun told her:

"Pay us back nine thousand piculs of grain, and we won't touch anything."

Kuo said hastily to Old Sun:

"Old Sun, don't waste time. Get sledges. One is not enough. Get two from some middle peasants."

Meanwhile, other groups had unearthed other hoards—bales and bundles. From noon to evening, sledges plied along the snow-covered highway through the village, loaded high with cases, trunks, bales, bundles, vats, jars, crates of maize, and big slices of frozen pork—dug out of caches in the kitchens, below the windows, beside the wells and behind the stables in the landlords' houses. The landlords had had porkers and sucking pigs slaughtered and cut into slices, which were frozen and buried under the snow, so that on New Year's Day their families could begin eating meat dumplings for one or two months.

Old Sun's sledge was loaded with wooden cases and gunny-bags, and on top of these lay the two dead black dogs, which had been hanged. There was no place to sit on the sledge, so Old Sun walked beside his horse with big strides, cracking his whip, and calling "Whoa! Chia!" On the way somebody asked him: "Whose trunks and bundles are these?" He answered, narrowing his left eye into a slit:

"This is wealth that's been washed away."

The man did not catch his meaning, and Old Sun did not trouble to explain, but added:

"Landlords are full of tricks. Today, if not for the cleverness of Chairman Kuo and Old Sun, the villagers wouldn't have found anything. Now that the revolution's succeeded, I must do my best and show people what I'm capable of. Whoa! Chia!" He gave his horse another flick of the whip.

VII

THIS time the Yuanmao villagers were really aroused. Confident that Kuo could manage all right, Team Leader Hsiao took Wan to Sanchia, a mountain village where more workers were needed. Kuo and some other activists saw them off at the South Gate. As he was leaving, Hsiao said to Kuo:

"You'd better move into the Association. And you must take good care to see that the bad elements don't set fire to the things we've confiscated." Then he got onto the sledge, and set out through the wind and snow at six miles an hour to Sanchia.

Acting on the advice of Team Leader Hsiao, Kuo moved into the premises of the Peasants' Association and occupied the room in which Hsiao had lived.

Busy day and night, the men and women of Yuanmao did not sleep much during the week, but they were in the best of spirits. On the night of the eighth day, Old Tien, who was in the group led by Old Chu, ran into the Peasants' Association and told Kuo:

"In the days of the old Chinese Republic, Goodman Tu was a gang leader in Weiho County, so he must have plenty of silver ingots."

Kuo answered:

"I know he has, but it's difficult to make him confess."

Old Tien suggested:

"Ask his eldest son by his first wife. The boy was ill-treated by the step-mother. One day I heard him say: 'Even if I had to die, I wouldn't die under the same roof with her.' Now he is living in a place of his own in the east side. If you get in touch with him, you may pick up some clue—who knows?"

Kuo also remembered that Goodman Tu's eldest son was a lover of the cup. He ladled up two bottlefuls of white wine from the stock in the co-operative store, fried a dish of bean-curd and a dish



. . . sledges plied along the snow-covered highway
through the village, loaded high with cases,
trunks. . . .



of beans, and invited young Tu to a meal. As they sipped the wine, they talked. Kuo drank very little, but sucked at his pipe as he watched his guest down one cup after another. As he drank, young Tu's tongue was loosed; when the two bottles were finished, Kuo fetched a third. This was seen, however, by some of the Children's League, who ran to report to the Women's Association. Mrs. Pai said: "Leave him alone. The men's troubles are no concern of ours."

But Liu Kuei-lan disagreed: "No, that won't do. Team Leader Hsiao has only been gone a few days, and here is Kuo beginning to go to the bad. Let's go and talk to him."

Off ran Liu Kuei-lan to the Peasants' Association, followed by a dozen girls of her own age, and by the swineherd Wu at the head of seven or eight boys—shepherds, tenders of cows and pigs. They burst noisily into the Peasants' Association, and Liu Kuei-lan led them up to the *kang*. Young Tu, quite fuddled, was taken by surprise—he thought they had come for him, and some of the boys were carrying spears! His trembling hand let go of the cup, the white wine spilling over the low-legged table and the *kang* mat. Red in the face, Liu Kuei-lan addressed Kuo:

"Chairman Kuo, will you step into the other room? We've something to say to you."

Kuo could pretty well guess from their expressions what they wanted. With a smile, he leaped off the *kang* and followed them into the west wing. Liu Kuei-lan's breast was heaving with anger, as she glared at Kuo. She jerked up her head and pursed her lips, but was too excited to speak. Wu, behind her, was looking angry too. After a while, Liu Kuei-lan blurted out:

"Chairman Kuo, what's this? The people get up early and go to bed late, putting up with all sorts of hardship to overthrow feudalism. And here *you* are, drinking happily with the good-for-nothing son of a big landlord. You're taking a leaf out of Chang Fu-ying's book, compromising with the enemy, aren't you?"

Kuo smiled and whispered something to Liu Kuei-lan. When she understood the situation, her anger melted away. She nodded, turned to consult Wu, then said:

"Let's go. We don't want to meddle with men's affairs. He'll have to be responsible for what he does."

She beat a retreat with the women and children in tow.

Meanwhile, young Tu had been hiding in the other room, pale with fright. Kuo came back and went on drinking with him. After a few more cups, the landlord's son began weeping. This was a habit with him. Holding the bottle in one hand, he described between sobs how badly his step-mother had treated him, making him work all day long, giving him thin gruel to eat and tattered clothes to wear. He said: "The winter after the break-up of Manchukuo, I went about without shoes. It was snowing, and she told me off to feed the pigs; I lost a little toe through frostbite, while my step-brother was sleeping comfortably on a heated *kang*. When I went into the room for some bean-cake for the horses, the old bitch said: 'What are you doing here? He has just fallen asleep; do you want to wake him? Can't you wait awhile?' My wife died long ago, but they've never arranged another marriage for me. I know I shan't have any share in their wealth. You go on fighting your hardest to clean them out of everything, and I'll not feel sorry."

Kuo interrupted him to ask:

"Has she any money of her own?"

"Sure, she has."

Kuo pursued:

"To whom will she leave her money?"

"To my step-brother, of course."

Sucking at his pipe, Kuo asked casually:

"Sure you won't have a share?"

"Not a hope."

Kuo leaned over and asked in a low voice:

"Do you know where they keep their gold and silver?"

"What do you mean?" Young Tu spilt some of his wine.

"Where is their gold and silver?"

"I don't know about the gold."

"Where is the silver then?"

"One day I happened to hear the old bitch say to my father: 'Go and have a look at that spot below the wild pear tree—we don't want a boar to root it up.'"

"Where is that wild pear tree?"

"I've no idea, really."

After the third bottle, Kuo sent young Tu off, then called a meeting of his small group; and they agreed to send Kuo and Old Sun to deal with Goodman Tu, while Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan questioned the womenfolk.

Goodman Tu simply repeated his old formula: "What do I have left? I've nothing left. I've handed over everything." Pressed, he swore: "May lightning strike me dead if I'm holding anything back."

Old Sun countered with a smile:

"This won't do. Your secret has leaked out. Your eldest son has already told Chairman Kuo about it."

Goodman Tu looked up in fright, beads of sweat breaking out on his wrinkled forehead. It took him some time to calm down again. Kuo and Old Sun conferred in an undertone, and Old Sun asked Goodman Tu:

"What's buried under the ground below the wild pear tree? Now do you still think we don't know all about it?"

Goodman Tu's eyes opened wide, but he parried:

"What did you say?"

Old Sun answered with a wink:

"Under the ground below the wild pear tree. What's there?"

Goodman Tu looked hard at Old Sun and at Kuo, to see whether they really knew about his secret hoard.

Kuo said smiling:

"Take us there, to show your good faith. If you refuse to tell us, and we have to find it ourselves, that will make your offence serious." Kuo turned to Old Sun: "Well, Old Sun, since he refuses, we can't force him—you take him away and ask his eldest son to come."

Goodman Tu walked with Old Sun to the doorway, but turned back to say:

"What did he tell you? It was a lie."

Old Sun asked:

"He? Who?"

Goodman Tu answered:

"That stupid boy of mine."

Old Sun narrowed his left eye, and said:

"What did he say? Well, he said. . . . Ah! . . ." Kuo had winked at him, so he muttered:

"He? He said nothing. Just that about the pear tree. . . ."

Before Old Sun had finished, Kuo winked at him again, making sure that Tu saw him, then put in:

"Oh no, he didn't say anything, did he?"

Old Sun grinned, and added:

"He said nothing. Don't you worry."

All this only made Goodman Tu very uneasy. Kuo's wink, the carter's insinuating tone and the mention of the wild pear tree conspired to bewilder and upset him. He hesitated, walked on, stopped, put a foot across the threshold, withdrew it and said:

"All right, we'll go to the wild pear tree. But we're too tired today. We'll go tomorrow."

Kuo, suspecting a trick, rapped out:

"If we go at all, we'll go today."

Goodman Tu sat down weakly on the edge of the *kang*, hung his head and groaned:

"I'm tired to death. Can't move. Tomorrow."

"Can't move, eh?" asked Old Sun. "Well, I've a sledge for you."

Old Sun went off for his sledge, and a few minutes later drove into the courtyard a three-horse sledge. From the driver's seat, he called loudly into the room:

"The sledge is ready for you, great God of Wealth!"

Goodman Tu came out and got reluctantly onto the sledge. Kuo and a militiaman sat beside him with a spade and a shovel. The landlord was the guide, and at a word from him the sledge set out towards the south. The snow pelted on their faces, and the wind made their noses ache with cold. Outside the South Gate, the road flattened out. The snow, which was falling in big flakes, covered the earth with a murky pall, whitening the road, the ditches and the fields, and blurring their outlines. The horses ran into a ditch, capsizing the sledge and toppling out the men; but they were none the worse for it, as the sledge was low and the soft snow cushioned their fall. They got to their feet, clambered back onto the sledge, and took the road again.

About two miles from the village, they reached a wild place overgrown with trees and shrubbery. Here Goodman Tu clambered off the sledge, looked around for a while, then pointed at a wild pear tree with a strip of bark peeled off one side. He growled dejectedly:

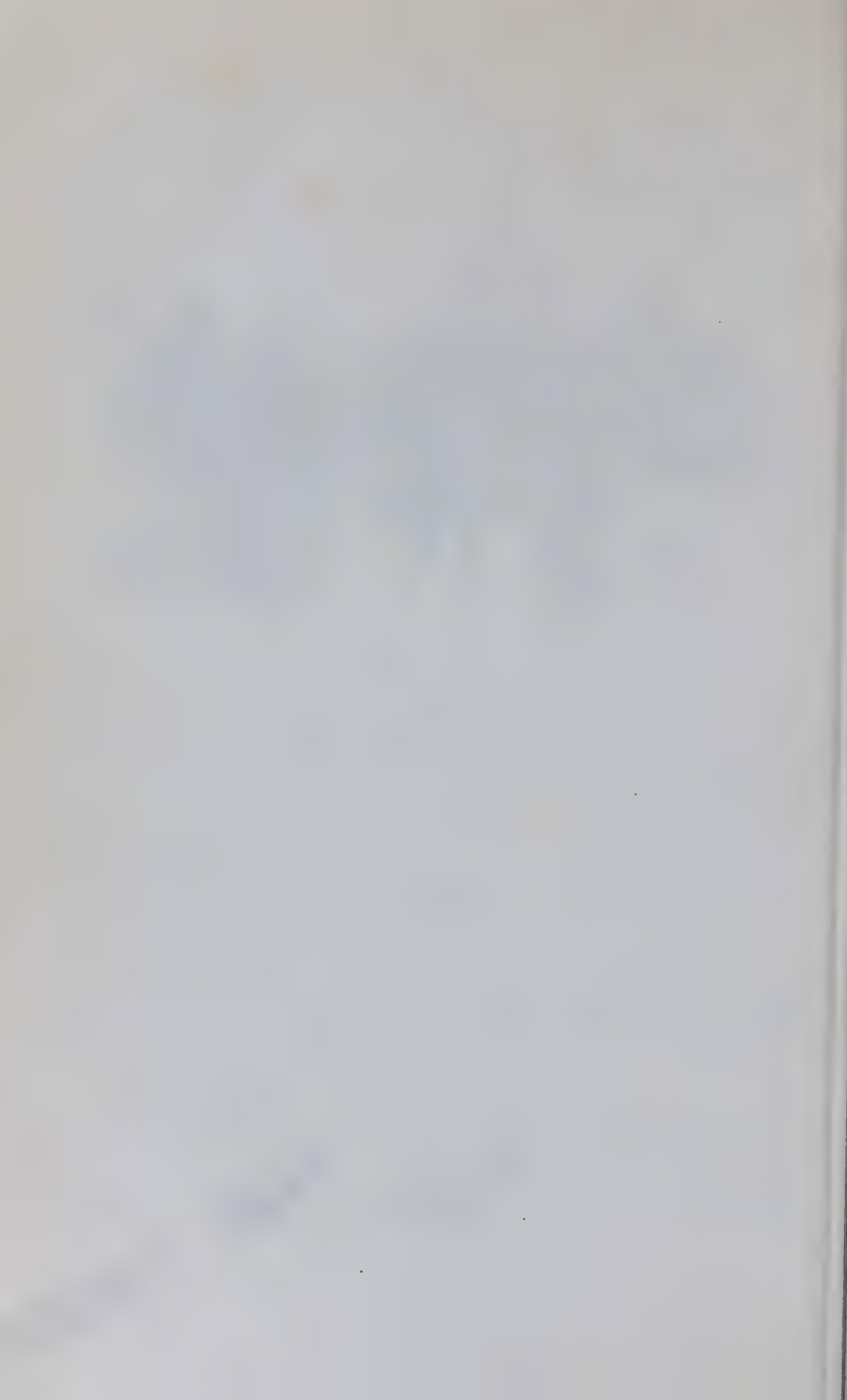
"Here. Dig under this tree."

He then retreated, sat himself down on the side plank of the sledge, rested his chin on his hands and sulked.

The militiaman shoveled aside the snow, while Kuo hacked away with his pick which clanged against the frozen earth. When Kuo



"Here. Dig under this tree."



was tired, the militiaman took over, and dug away with even greater energy. Soon snow covered their caps and shoulders. Out of the black earth came something solid and grey. Old Sun exclaimed:

"An ingot has come into the world!"

Four more appeared in succession. The peasants stared at these strange objects which they had never set eyes on before. The ingots looked like old, lead winecups with handles on each side, and a rough, uneven surface. They commented:

"I wouldn't have picked it up on the road."

"Just like a piece of lead."

Old Sun picked one up, tapped it with his finger and said with the air of a connoisseur:

"Would lead give this sound? This one weighs fifty-two ounces. During the Manchu Dynasty I saw plenty of silver ingots. They didn't belong to me, of course."

VIII

ALL the doors and windows of the west wing of the Peasants' Association were closed tight, and the smoke from a fire burning on the ground was making people cough and making their eyes water. The poor peasants and farm labourers were meeting once more. Old Sun gesticulated as he told about the unearthing of the silver ingots. The little swineherd Wu hurried in and whispered into the ear of Kuo, who then said:

"Go and find out some more about it."

And he sent Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan after Wu to check up on the matter.

The two women arrived at the outer room of the east wing of Goodman Tu's house, where a crowd of idle neighbours had already gathered. The two daughters-in-law of the Tu family were having a row. Standing behind Wu, Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan saw the thin daughter-in-law sitting cross-legged on the *kang*, her face flushed with rage, a long stemmed pipe hanging from her mouth. Paying no attention to the strangers, she removed the pipe, spat on the ground and growled:

"Can't you keep a civil tongue in your head? Whom are you scolding?"

The plump, melon-faced daughter-in-law unbuttoned her blue

cotton-padded coat, pulled out a big breast and put the nipple into the mouth of her whimpering baby. Then she retorted:

"What business is it of yours if I scold my child?"

The thin daughter-in-law knocked the bowl of her pipe against the edge of the *kang* and refilled it, as she remarked:

"Don't point at the hen while you curse the dog!"

The fat daughter-in-law sprang up, pulling her breast from her child's mouth and setting it crying again.

"Suppose I *do* mean you, what of it?" she shrilled.

The thin one stepped forward, stood her long stemmed pipe on the ground and accused:

"Why did you curse me? You are a bad wife. All day long, you did nothing but curse. Last year, when I was having my baby, you quarrelled with your husband, and I was so frightened that I fell seriously ill."

The fat one also stepped forward, tucking the wailing baby under her left arm, and, pointing a finger of her right hand at the nose of her opponent, she countered with great vehemence:

"Who's a bad wife? Once, to appease you, your husband went down on his knees, kowtowed to you and begged your pardon. He doted on you like your doll, he accompanied you like your shadow."

"Yes, he did kowtow to me, but it was because you frightened me during my childbirth and made me ill. You made a great deal of noise."

"I made a great deal of noise? I didn't make a great deal of noise in your room. Your illness was of your own making."

The thin woman demanded:

"Who made me cook for the whole household while I was still sick?"

The fat one parried:

"Who it was who forced her husband to kowtow?"

"That was *your* fault."

"It was *your* fault."

"It was your fault for refusing to have the *kang* cleaned out just before New Year."

The fat one, forgetting that people were listening, countered:

"Wasn't it cleaned out? Wasn't it cleaned out?"

Mrs. Pai heard this, and it made her suspicious. She winked at Liu Kuei-lan, and they squeezed through the throng and stepped out

into the yard. As they walked off, they speculated about the *kang*. Mrs. Pai suggested:

"Let's take the riddle to Kuo. If several people put their heads together, they should be able to solve it."

The two women hurried to the Peasants' Association. Meanwhile, the two daughters-in-law of the Tu family continued their quarrel. Some of the on-lookers enjoyed it, some tried to mediate, some discussed the rights and wrongs:

"These two women are like diamond cutting diamond."

"If only one of them were more easy-going, this would never have started."

"It takes two to make a quarrel."

"These women are fierce."

"Stop wrangling, sisters."

"Why not go to the Women's Association to settle it?"

"Can women from landlords' families go to the Women's Association?"

The family brawl lasted from noon to dusk. Meanwhile, the poor peasants and farmhands continued their discussions in small groups. As Kuo listened to Mrs. Pai's report, he knitted his brows in thought, his pipe between his teeth, and muttered:

"Who would clean out a *kang* in winter?"

Liu Kuei-lan chimed in:

"The fat daughter-in-law said: 'Wasn't it cleaned? Wasn't it cleaned?' So it must have been cleaned out."

Kuo asked himself again:

"How is it that in winter they should have wanted the *kang* cleaned?"

Mrs. Pai caught up:

"That's just it."

While the others chatted, Kuo cudgelled his brains for an answer to the mystery. Then he said:

"There's something wrong with that *kang*. Let's go and look at it."

Old Sun said:

"I've seen it already."

"Did you dig into it?"

"No, I didn't."

"Let's go and dig. We'll move the Tu family to the west pent-house."

Kuo led his men to the Tu house. They took with them picks, spades and pokers. By the time they got there, the daughters-in-law had agreed to a truce, and the spectators had gone back to their homes. One daughter-in-law was lying on the *kang* in the inner room; the other was rocking her baby to sleep in the outer room. Kuo made the fat one shift to the west penthouse with her baby. Then he jumped onto the vacated south *kang* and began to tap it with a poker. When he tapped a brick under the low-legged table on one side of the *kang*, it sounded different from the rest. He immediately changed the poker for a spade, with which he prized up that brick; and underneath appeared a tin box. They all jumped onto the *kang*. Kuo opened the box and found in it two gold rings, a gold plaque, a gold hair-pin. At the bottom was a wad of faded, yellowish papers, including a land deed issued by the puppet Manchukuo government and two lists of names written in minute characters.

Kuo sent Wu to fetch the smallpox physician. In a few minutes, the latter arrived, bringing his abacus again, on the assumption that he was wanted to do some calculations. As he came in, Kuo greeted him:

"Uncle Black, come right up on to the *kang* and read me these two sheets. What's written there?" The smallpox physician put his spectacles on, picked up a sheet of yellowish paper and began reading:

"In 1946 a red bandit named Hsiao Hsiang and his gang forced me to hand over five hundred *mou* of good land bequeathed by my ancestors, and divided it among Li Chang-yu, Chu Fu-lin (Old Chu), Tien Wan-shun, Chang Ching-hsiang, Sun Yung-fu (Old Sun). . . ."

Like a flood breaking through a sluice-gate, an angry protest burst out. Old Sun cried the loudest:

"That's a black list! Son of a bitch! He put my name down too. What a bloody nerve!"

Kuo was mute with indignation, his face flushed, his neck swelling. Old Tien grumbled:

"He even calls Team Leader Hsiao a red bandit!"

Old Sun said:

"That's traitor's talk. In 1935, Goodman Tu was commander of a so-called self-defence corps which helped the Japanese fight the anti-Japanese guerillas. He was always talking then about a

red bandit. I never knew who that red bandit was until last year, when Team Leader Hsiao came to this village and told me about the leader of the guerillas, Chao Shang-chih."

Old Chu came in, and Old Sun told him about the discovery.

"How do you like that? You're black-listed too."

Old Chu thundered:

"Let's go and catch him. Beat him to death!"

Kuo quickly asked:

"Where is he?"

"He is pretending to be innocent. He has gone up the hill for firewood."

By now Kuo felt cooler. He had stopped flushing, and said calmly:

"We don't want to arrest him, but we can't let him wander about just as he pleases. That's carrying leniency too far. In his heart he's still plotting against us."

Old Sun continued:

"Yes, the law-breakers should be put under house arrest."

The other men responded in a chorus:

"Old Sun is right. Let's set limits beyond which the landlords mustn't go."

Some of them were already going off to look for Goodman Tu, when Kuo called out:

"Wait a minute. Here's another paper. Uncle Black, tell us what's written here."

The smallpox physician read:

"The following are officers of the Peasants' Association of Yuanmao appointed by the Communists: Chao Yu-lin, Kuo Chuan-hai, Li Chang-yu, Pai Yu-shan, Chang Ching-hsiang. . . ." He read on. All the group leaders were also black-listed. Then followed the names of those peasants who had been distributed Tu's belongings, who had received a picul of beans, a peck of kaoliang, a bottle of bean-oil and even a sieve. Those who had got a mare or colt were listed too, and details were given as to the age and colour of each animal. The women sighed and cursed:

"That's what the landlord's like at heart!"

"He always wears a smile—to hide his hate!"

"He stings like a hornet and grinds like a millstone."

"He prepared this black list for the 'Central Army,' hoping they would cut off our heads."

"That 'Central Army' will never come back again. They're being surrounded in Changchun and wiped out by our troops."

When the smallpox physician had finished reading the list, Old Sun sidled up to him and asked in a whisper:

"Am I listed among the officers of the Peasants' Association?"

"No, but you're down as getting the leg of a horse. A brown horse, wasn't it?"

Old Sun straightened up and declared:

"Yes, I got the leg of a horse. But how is it I'm not down among the officers? I was the one who drove Team Leader Hsiao into this village, and once he was here, I became active."

The smallpox physician took off his spectacles, and said with a laugh:

"You're right; he forgot you. I'll add your name, shall I?"

Kuo took Chang Ching-shui aside, and told him to get a sledge ready, to take Goodman Tu's land deed and black lists to Team Leader Hsiao in Sanchia and to ask Hsiao's advice as to what to do with Goodman Tu.

A few hours later, Chang drove back from Sanchia with Hsiao's instructions. The poor peasants, farmhands and middle peasants should be summoned to a meeting, to hear the black lists read, to discuss the matter and to decide what to do with Goodman Tu. But the village officers must see that nobody beat Tu or even tied him up. Hsiao also pointed out that if landlords had made and buried black lists, they might also have stowed away guns, which must be unearthed too.

The poor peasants, farmhands and middle peasants met and talked till midnight. They were now as angry with Goodman Tu as they had been with Han Number Six. Old Chu proposed that Goodman Tu be thrown out of his house, to live in a stable for a change. "See if he'll make another black list there."

Chang Ching-shui added:

"Other landlords should be thrown out too."

Kuo stood up and asked the whole gathering:

"Do you agree, all of you?"

They showed their approval by clapping. Some villagers were already setting off to carry out this decision, when Kuo added:

"Wait a minute. If Goodman Tu black-listed us, he could have buried his guns too. When he served as a gang leader, he was

in contact with the bandits of Weiho County; and he headed a Japanese-sponsored self-defence corps which fought against the Anti-Japanese Amalgamated Armies. Did he have guns or not? What do you think, folks?"

They answered in one voice:

"Of course, he did."

"He must have had."

"What did he build his four gun turrets for?"

Kuo asked:

"What if he refuses to surrender them?"

They roared together:

"Give him a good hiding."

"String him up."

"Gouge out his two slits of eyes, so that he won't be able to aim his guns."

Kuo shook his head and smiled, drawing at his pipe:

"No. Force is out of the question. Force isn't in line with Chairman Mao Tse-tung's policy. We must first find out whether Goodman Tu actually has guns or not."

Old Sun chimed in:

"I'm sure he has. I remember, the year after the Japanese surrender, that bandit Liu Tso-fei of the 'Central Army' came here with Goodman Tu's second son and Han's first son. One day, I heard with my own ears a gunshot fired by somebody in the Tu house."

Kuo answered:

"Well, that's a clue for us. We must find out the facts, then hold a meeting to thresh it out with him."

IX

By now eighty per cent of the populace of Yuanmao had joined the struggle and become politically active. Goodman Tu's black lists had made the villagers realize that the landlords had not undergone a change of heart but meant to fight back. Hatred for the landlords was aroused again. The peasants said: "To protect ourselves, we must take their weapons. So long as they have arms hidden, we can't live in peace." Meetings big and small went on

day and night, and the fight against feudalism once more swept the village like a hurricane.

On the third night after the unearthing of the black lists in the Tu house, the peasants had a heated discussion in the west wing of the Peasants' Association. A big five-wick, bean-oil lamp, hanging from the central beam, cast its flickering light on the mass of people. They were waiting for Goodman Tu. Old Chu shouted:

"If he refuses to hand over his guns, let's send him to the county prison. Then we needn't trouble ourselves about him any more."

Kuo said nothing. He thought a while, conferred in a low voice with several other activists, and then told Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan to go to get Goodman Tu's fat daughter-in-law to confess where the arms were hidden. At this moment, somebody behind Kuo exclaimed: "Here he comes!" A light flashed across the windowpane, the door swung open and two militiamen walked Goodman Tu in, pale in the face, fat and heavy and shaky, scarcely able to stand. During the last two days he had confessed to three more caches in the hope that the villagers would forget about his guns. But it was his guns the peasants wanted now; they were not interested in anything else. The lamplight flickered in the smoke-laden air. Somebody cursed Goodman Tu to his face:

"A good face with a bad heart. A smile on your face, but hate in your heart."

"How many black and bloody things have you done in your lifetime!"

"You contracted for the building of bridges and repairing of roads, but you forced poor men to work without pay. That was borrowing joss-sticks from a neighbour and burning them before Buddha for your own sake."

Kuo remarked evenly:

"If you hand over your Mauser, you can surely expiate all your sins."

At this Goodman Tu raised his head a little, and glanced at the men around him as if he had something to say; but he thought better of it, and lowered his eyes again. Kuo whispered something to Old Sun, who approached Goodman Tu and addressed him:

"Merciful, good-hearted Mr. Tu!"

Goodman Tu looked at this carter with the narrowed left eye, who had worked for him as a hired labourer. Old Sun went on evenly:

"Take my word for it—after working for you all those years, I know everything about you. In the old Chinese Republic you kept guns, and after the Japanese surrender you had even a Mauser. Hurry up and tell us where they are, and we'll let you go home to make an honest living."

"I *have* no guns, so what is there to tell you?"

Old Sun said:

"So you're giving us the same old answer again! Let me ask you, what did you build your gun turrets for?"

Cornered and scared by all the eyes glaring at him, Goodman Tu hesitated and then said:

"I kept a musket, nothing else."

Chang Ching-shui pursued:

"Where's the musket?"

"Surrendered to the government long ago."

Old Sun asked:

"What government?"

"The old Chinese Republic."

"Old blockhead! Only the Eighth Route Army can be called a government, don't you know?"

Chang Ching-shui quickly interposed, fearing that Old Sun was digressing. But Goodman Tu was already taking advantage of it. He nodded his head:

"Yes, I'm an old blockhead. I don't know what's what. But I've repented and determined to mend my ways. I've given up my gold, and made up my mind to support the Peasants' Association. I'm going to take the proletarian stand, and serve the people."

Everybody laughed at the old hypocrite.

Chang Ching-shui said:

"Don't laugh, everybody. If you really mean to mend your ways, Mr. Tu, first hand over your rifles."

Goodman Tu answered:

"How could farmers like us have guns?"

Old Chu interjected:

"If you've no guns, what about pistols?"

"No pistols either."

Old Chu pushed forward and raised his voice:

"No pistols, indeed! Your second son swaggered about with a pistol stuck in his boot. Everybody knew it."

"I don't have any pistols, really. May lightning strike me dead if I'm telling a lie!"

Red in the face, Old Chu boomed:

"No? Take him out."

Chang Ching-shui started toying with his rifle, pushing the lock up and down noisily. Goodman Tu turned pale with terror.

Old Chu resumed:

"We know for sure that he has rifles and pistols. But he wants to keep them to use against us. What shall we do with him, since he won't talk?"

"Tie him up."

"Throw him into prison."

The little swineherd Wu gave him a push, whereupon he wailed:

"Aiyoh, mother! Don't frighten me, I've asthma. Aiyoh! My eyes are swimming. Mother!"

He was sinking to the ground, when the men beside him hoisted him up by the arms. Somebody gave him water to drink. He straightened up and rolled his eyes upwards. Wu remarked:

"Calling mother at your age, eh!"

Boiling over with rage, Chang Ching-shui banged his rifle on the floor and raged:

"He's shamming. If he doesn't stop this at once, we'll take him away."

Kuo, who had been quiet all along, said calmly, puffing at his pipe:

"You had better confess. Anyway, you can't get away with it."

Goodman Tu answered mournfully:

"What more have I got to confess? I've handed over my gold and silver."

Chang Ching-shui put in angrily:

"It's not your gold and silver we want now. Hand over your guns!"

Goodman Tu sat down on the edge of the *kang*, asked for another bowl of water, then leaned against the wall and began slowly:

"In May last year, my second son came back from Harbin with Han Shih-yuan, the first son of Han Number Six. It is true that Han Shih-yuan brought back a pistol. It is true that he often stuck it in his boot. They came back in one cart. Han Shih-yuan brought back a woman, too. He didn't dare take that woman home for fear that his wife would fight with him, so he left her in the west wing of my house. He stayed with that whore all the time, chatting and laughing. One day, I heard gunshots in the west wing, and my grandson was very scared. I thought young Han was going to kill his woman. Later on, when he was shooting pheasants outside the South Gate, he attracted the attention of the bandits, who came at midnight and dragged him off. Then he joined the bandits, taking his gun with him."

Chang Ching-shui cut in:

"All humbug!"

Old Chu remarked:

"Cock-and-bull story."

Old Sun said to Kuo:

"See what a good story-teller he is; he's cleared himself completely!"

Goodman Tu raised his round face and affirmed:

"Every word I say is true. You can check it easily—Han Shih-yuan's women are there, you can ask them. I told you only the truth—you can blow out my brains, if I said one word that was untrue."

Old Sun retorted with a wink:

"No more investigation is necessary. After working for three years in your house, I know everything about you. Your second son did nothing but play with his gun all day long. Han Shih-yuan had a gun, but so did your son. Did you think I didn't know that?"

Chang Ching-shui demanded, glaring at Goodman Tu:

"Your son was with the third 'Central' bandit army—he joined with Han Shih-yuan; one day he returned home from Harbin with a cartload of loot. The cart was stolen too. At that time, who dared travel? Could he have brought all that stuff back without a gun?"

Goodman Tu parried:

"Both the goods and the gun belonged to Han Shih-yuan."

Chang Ching-shui flared up:

"Don't try to lay the blame at the door of a dead man. When did Han Shih-yuan live in your west wing? Your own son lived there, and practised marksmanship in the kitchen. Ask any of the neighbours—they all heard him."

Old Sun chimed in:

"Don't think we don't know all about it."

Old Chu rolled up his sleeves, baring his strong, brawny arms, and shouted:

"He won't confess. Take him away!"

Goodman Tu did not move, nor did he speak. He stood rooted in the middle of the room, like a stump of wood. Wu suddenly stuck his head out from under Old Chu's upraised arm and threw in Goodman Tu's face:

"I say, you're a big bad egg. You keep your arms—what do you want to do with them? Against whom will you use them? You black-listed us, and you wanted to fight back, eh! Do you want to live?"

Goodman Tu gave the same old answer:

"Really, I've no guns. . . . Mother! You're wronging an innocent man."

Wu laughed:

"You fool! You're an old man and a grandfather, yet you call for your mother all the time."

Kuo had been to consult with Mrs. Pai, but was back now. Turning his back on Goodman Tu, he spoke to several men in an undertone. Goodman Tu immediately stopped his wailing and pricked up his ears in an attempt to catch the conversation. Kuo suddenly turned upon him and boomed:

"You're an old elm block. You shut your mouth like a dead man. But your eldest daughter-in-law has told us for you."

Goodman Tu fidgetted uneasily for a moment, then came out calmly with his threadbare answer:

"I've no guns. What farmer can afford guns?"

Kuo finally gave orders for Tu to be taken to prison. Two militiamen squeezed out of the throng; one grabbed Goodman Tu's collar and the other was going to tie him up with a rope, when Kuo said:

"Why tie him? No. He won't be able to escape."

Goodman Tu walked out. Old Sun followed him to the gateway and called to the militiamen:

"Take care not to let him make for that elm tree."

One of the militiamen answered:

"Don't you worry. We know our job."

Old Sun lingered there in the moonlight watching the three men walk past the elm tree; for he was afraid that Goodman Tu might run his head against the trunk. Then, he turned back to the room. The three men's footsteps were clearly visible on the newly fallen snow.

X

AFTER the meeting broke up, Kuo set off to confer with the women's group. With the moon in the sky and the snow on the ground, it was a bright silvery world. Kuo walked towards the Tu house in a cap with the ear-flaps down and with his hands stuck in the sleeves of his cotton-padded coat. The women of Goodman Tu's family were living in the north wing, and the women activists had surrounded the fat daughter-in-law to make her tell them where the arms were hidden.

Kuo stepped into the east room. The air was hot and steamy. He waited a moment before pushing through the throng. The fat daughter-in-law was standing in the middle of a cluster of women, staring round with her small eyes in her melon-shaped face. Some women were sitting cross-legged on the *kang*; one sucking a stemmed pipe two or three feet long, another suckling a baby, a third, who was near her time, taking up the place of two people. Old Tien's wife sat on a bench, twisting hemp cords while listening to the hubbub. Chao Yu-lin's wife was standing beside Mrs. Tien, resting her hands on the shoulders of her boy, So-chu. Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan were tackling the fat daughter-in-law. Liu Kuei-lan saw Kuo come in, but pretended not to have noticed him. Mrs. Pai stepped up to him and said:

"I've pleaded and threatened; but she just says she knows nothing."

Puffing noisily at his pipe, Kuo went up to the fat woman and said:

"They all say you know. Tell us what you know. If you wait until we find the arms ourselves, it will be serious for you."

She felt that this man spoke differently, glanced at him and said:

"Suppose I tell you, but you go there and find nothing?"

Taking his pipe from his mouth, Kuo answered:

"If you tell us all you know, you won't be to blame if we don't find anything." Lest she should change her mind, he added: "If, on the other hand, you know and refuse to tell, you'll be involved. The government can lock you up too. If things come to that, you'll be sorry when it's too late."

She answered hesitantly:

"What, if my father-in-law beats me for letting on?"

Old Chu shouted:

"He wouldn't dare."

Mrs. Pai put in, arching her black eyebrows:

"We of the women's group will support you. If he lifts one finger against you or touches one hair of your head, we'll make him kneel before you until you tell him to get up."

Old Sun put in, narrowing his left eye into a slit:

"Our Mrs. Pai is a capable woman."

The fat woman looked at Mrs. Pai and asked:

"If I tell you, can I join the Women's Association?"

Mrs. Pai replied:

"If you have this to your credit, you'll be welcome. But you'll be respected for this even if you aren't in the Women's Association."

The fat daughter-in-law heaved a sigh, then answered hesitantly:

"All right, I'll tell you."

She said that her brother-in-law, the second son of Goodman Tu, had deposited two rifles in the house of her brother in Wuchia. Her brother-in-law and her brother were sworn brothers and members of a secret society. She had seen with her own eyes the two brand-new rifles. As to where her brother had stowed them, she had no idea. Kuo, hearing this, immediately told Old Sun to get a sledge ready. Mrs. Pai, Liu Kuei-lan, Wu and some other women and children were to watch the gate and let no one in or out for the moment; and Chang Ching-shui was to go to the Peasants' Association to watch over the confiscated property there.

Then, Kuo and two militiamen took the fat woman by Old Sun's sledge to Wuchia. Upon leaving, he did not forget to ask Mrs. Chao to look after the fat woman's child, so that it need not go with its mother through the snow at midnight.

It was a bright night, with stars glittering in the sky and snow covering the ground, trees and gullies. The sledge sped along as swiftly as a motor-car. While the three horses were galloping over the snow, Kuo chatted with the fat woman, coming soon to the topic of guns. She remarked:

"Yes, there are guns, but I haven't the slightest idea where they're hidden. I've been married only three years, and my husband doesn't tell me about such things."

Kuo touched upon her squabble with her sister-in-law, and she exploded—she cursed the thin woman and everybody related to her, beginning with her parents and ending with her husband. The sledge sped on over two miles, and she cursed the whole of the way. Kuo put in a word edgewise:

"Is it possible that your sister-in-law knows something about the arms?"

The fat woman thought to herself: "Go to hell with her, why should I protect *her*?" She declared loudly:

"I'm sure she does. Her husband hid the guns; he must have told her about it."

By now they had reached Wuchia, and the sledge drew up before the fat woman's brother's house. All the doors and windows were closed. They knocked at the gate for quite a few minutes before they were admitted. A lamp was lighted, and the fat woman's brother clambered off the *kang* and got into his clothes. His sister spoke to him in an undertone, and he turned to Kuo and said matter-of-factly:

"All right, I'll take you there."

Leaving the fat woman behind with Old Sun, Kuo and the two militiamen set off with her brother towards a pine wood. The red sun, rising in the east, made the snow glisten till it dazzled the eye. After covering about one mile, they came to a slope and stopped by a fallen pine. The fat woman's brother scraped aside the spongy snow with his foot until a yellow oil-cloth showed through. The militiamen grabbed this, and drew out a bundle. When they opened it, two brand-new 99 mm. rifles were once more exposed to the light

of day. The butts were smeared with chicken-fat, and the barrels were rusty. The fat woman's brother led the militiamen to another spot not far away, and from another cache, filled with snow, they lifted out fifty-one rounds of cartridges.

On the way back to Yuanmao, as the sledge sped gaily along with its load of men, one woman and two 99 mm. rifles, Kuo chatted with Tu's daughter-in-law, while the militiamen sang the song *Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*. As the sledge reached the highway, Old Sun cracked his whip and exulted: "They hid guns, hoping to fight back. Now, what can they do?"

Back in the village, they found greyish wisps of smoke rising from the house-tops—the villagers were preparing breakfast. There being no wind, the wisps of smoke looked like so many white pillars thrusting into the frozen sky. Chang Ching-shui was still sleeping when the sledge crunched into the courtyard of the Peasants' Association. He woke at the sound, rolled off the *kang*, ran out into the courtyard and helped to unload the rifles. Soon, the neighbours streamed in to have a look at the guns. Kuo told Old Sun and the militiamen to go home and sleep. Still wide awake himself, he said to the fat woman:

"Let's go to your house."

As the fat woman walked by Kuo's side, she asked him:

"Chairman Kuo, do you think I could find another man? You see, my husband has been gone for two years, and I've not heard from him."

Kuo did not answer her, but walked on silently without so much as a glance at her. Then she dared not say any more. Back in her house, the fat woman worked on her sister-in-law till noon; but the thin woman kept her mouth tightly shut. Then Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan arrived, and Kuo told them to release the fat woman and talk to the thin woman themselves. In less than an hour, she confessed too. She told them to look under the huge pile of firewood in the courtyard. Two or three hundred men from the Peasants' Association removed the pile and found a 28 mm. Mauser. But the striker and the bullets were missing. Mrs. Pai asked the thin woman:

"Do you know where the striker and the bullets are? Tell us that, and you'll have done a really good job."



The sledge sped along. . . .

"I really have no idea. Ask my father-in-law."

Kuo and a few activists had to tackle Goodman Tu once more. Within a few hours, they got the information out of him. The striker and bullets were to be found soaked in tung oil in a bottle, which was buried in the ground in a mound of earth outside the North Gate. Old Chu and some other activists, accompanied by Goodman Tu, dug out the bottle. When they broke it, oil spilled out and they recovered the striker and twenty-five bullets.

Thereupon, rifles, Mausers and bullets which had been stowed away here and there were unearthed one after another.

After giving them the information to unearth the striker and bullets, Goodman Tu sat down dejectedly on the snowy mound, pulling his cap over his eyes to avoid their glances. On the way back to the village, while the other men chatted and laughed, he remained silent—when asked questions, he gave no answers. Then, suddenly, he muttered tearfully:

"My mind's so confused—I can't think straight any more."

Scarcely had the party entered the North Gate when they saw a brown horse galloping towards them. Chang Ching-shui leaped off, ran up to Kuo and gasped:

"They've come to 'clean house' for us!"

Kuo asked, nonplussed:

"Who? From what village? Where are they now?"

"From Minhsin Village. They're in the Peasants' Association."

Kuo left the party and hurried off. He had heard about this "house-cleaning." Poor peasants and farmhands from one village would go to a neighbouring village to lend a hand in the struggle against feudalism. Kuo did not think Yuanmao needed this help. His father and he had lived in this village for two generations, yet he had not been certain that Goodman Tu possessed guns; and, if not for Tu's daughters-in-law, the landlord's arms might never have been found. If the natives of this village were still in the dark about local conditions, people from other villages must be even more so. How could they "clean house" without making mistakes? When he reached the Peasants' Association, he found the space outside the gate cluttered with more than thirty sledges and the courtyard swarming with over two hundred men and women. They had brought red flag and were beating drums and gongs. Kuo sent a militiaman to Sanchia to inform Team Leader Hsiao of the

arrival of these "house-cleaners." Then he turned with a smile to welcome the guests, saying:

"Come on in, please. It's very cold outside."

The visitors crowded into the north wing. Very soon, poor peasants and farmhands streamed into the premises to see what the "house-cleaners" looked like. The leader of the Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League of the Minhsin Village said to Kuo:

"We've heard that you haven't settled scores yet with the landlord Tang of your village. He has a piece of good land in our village and he has exploited us, too. So we've come to help you 'clean house.' Knowing that your village has a fine revolutionary record, we feel sure that you won't protect the landlords." This last sentence stung Kuo to the quick—his face fell, his heart sank and he could not speak. This was like him—whenever he was offended or got excited, he was dumb. Old Chu came to his rescue. Raising his eyebrows, he asked:

"Who protects the landlords?"

There suddenly appeared from behind League Leader Chen of Minhsin Village another man. This was a strapping fellow who, taking off his cap so that the top of his head steamed, chimed in:

"Who's letting off Snatcher Tang?"

Kuo could speak now. He said evenly:

"We are tackling him now."

The big man shouted:

"You leave a big landlord alone. You're biased and protect a bad egg."

Chang Ching-shui produced the rifles which had been unearthed at Wuchia a short time ago, displayed them to the visitors and said:

"Protecting landlords, do you say? How could we have unearthed such things, then?"

Old Sun had been at first scared by this assembly of sledges and men carrying rifles and spears and declaring that they were here to "clean house" for Yuanmao. To him, "clean house" meant inviting witch doctors to exorcize evil spirits. He thought that something must have gone wrong in Yuanmao and that the visiting "house-cleaners" were here upon official orders. He had stood behind the others, not daring to step forward. Now, however, he saw that his friends were not at all afraid as they argued with the strangers. Even Chang Ching-shui had made a retort. Old Sun

felt emboldened to take a few steps forward, and, sticking out his head from behind Chang Ching-shui, he shouted into the face of the leader of the peasants from Minhsin:

"You're League Leader Chen, I suppose. But why do you use a name like 'house-cleaning'? A short while ago, we smashed the old Buddha in the house of Goodman Tu; but you're still using superstitious terms. It seems to me you're lagging behind us."

To avoid a scene, Kuo took Chen by the hand and squeezed with him through the throng into the outer room. He took his pipe out of his waist-band, filled the bowl with tobacco, lighted it at the kitchen stove and invited the guest to a smoke. They began to talk in a friendly way. They had met before at a meeting of activists in the county, so Kuo went straight to the point:

"You've come to fight our landlords, to help us to free ourselves. Don't think we're not grateful. But we're afraid you may make mistakes because you don't understand conditions here."

League Leader Chen answered:

"I suggest we hold a meeting to discuss how our two villages can co-operate."

Kuo said:

"Why not?"

Meanwhile, out in the courtyard, red flags were flying, while drums and gongs sounded. The Minhsin guests had hoisted their red flag on the house-top, and the Yuanmao villagers had hoisted theirs on top of the grain pyramid. The former were sounding drums and gongs; the latter, in addition to drums and gongs, could boast a trumpet. The women of Yuanmao invited the women of Minhsin into the west wing, where a fire had been lit at which the guests could warm their hands and feet and dry their clothes. When their faces were flushed with heat, they laid their heads together, and then shouted in chorus:

"We ask our sisters of Yuanmao to sing a song!"

Blushing, Liu Kuei-lan stood on the *kang* and led the song: *The More We Fight, the Stronger We Become*. After they finished singing, they were clapping their hands to urge their counterparts from Minhsin to sing, when Kuo called them to a meeting in the east wing, and they all went over.

Standing high on the *kang*, Kuo addressed the Yuanmao villagers:

"The poor peasants and farmhands of Minhsin are here to help us emancipate ourselves. Shall we bid them welcome?"

A hundred voices answered:

"Welcome!"

Kuo asked again:

"What should we do to make them welcome?"

The villagers seemed quite unprepared for this question. There was an awkward silence, and then Old Sun's hoarse voice was heard from a distant corner:

"We should pay them a return visit, 'clean house' for them and help them emancipate themselves."

This made everybody laugh. Even the guests from Minhsin could not close their mouths for laughing. With a smile, Kuo remarked:

"That's not necessary. The people of Minhsin are more progressive than we. They came to settle scores with Snatcher Tang. But we've tackled Snatcher Tang twice already, and there isn't much property left. It's such a cold day, too, and our guests have a long way to go—it's pretty hard on them. Shouldn't we make them a present out of the confiscated property of Snatcher Tang? He has land in Minhsin, so he has exploited them there too. What do you suggest we should make over to them?"

Old Chu suggested:

"Two cratefuls of firewood."

The big man from Minhsin immediately disagreed:

"You've taken his gold, silver, grain and clothes. What's left over for us is firewood! This is unfair—you take the flesh, we've nothing but rind."

It was all pandemonium again. Man against man, woman against woman, the two sides began haggling once more. The women of Minhsin shouted:

"We ask our brothers and sisters of Yuanmao not to protect landlords!"

Boiling over, Mrs. Pai leaped off the *kang* and asked loudly:

"Who protects landlords? We've unearthed their guns. Do you call that protecting landlords?"

The women of Minhsin shouted:

"We ask our brothers and sisters of Yuanmao to help us dig up Snatcher Tang's property."

Mrs. Pai was going to make another reply, when Kuo signed to her to be quiet. He mounted the *kang* and, waving his hand at the crowd, declared:

"Don't start haggling, please. We poor men are one family. We can easily settle all differences; we needn't quarrel. We shan't give pot-bellied landlords a chance to laugh at us. The world belongs to poor men. We of Yuanmao don't mind giving up part of the gains of struggle. If you're short of fodder, take two stacks of hay from the Tang house and two or three hundred bean-cakes. They were left to the Peasants' Association, but you take them to be going on with."

Then, the peasant leader of Minhsin also stood up and spoke:

"Listen to me, brothers and sisters of Minhsin! The poor men of Yuanmao treat the poor men of Minhsin as brothers. They want to give us a generous share of their gains of struggle, which they themselves need badly for production. Now, I ask you, should we accept their offer?"

The poor men and women of Minhsin responded in voices like thunder:

"No!"

"No, we mustn't accept."

"Their gains of struggle belong to them, not to us."

Now, they were friends again, not disputants. The activists from both sides laid their heads together for a moment and agreed upon a solution—the visitors from Minhsin were to take with them one stack of hay and one hundred bean-cakes to tide them over the winter shortage of fodder. Then, Kuo declared:

"A man I sent to Sanchia has just come back with instructions from Team Leader Hsiao. He says: 'Snatcher Tang's property should be dealt with by the poor men of Yuanmao.' He also says: 'House-cleaning proved useful in Hulan County. But it may not be equally effective elsewhere. However, the poor men and women of Minhsin went to clean house for the poor men and women of Yuanmao with the best intentions. The two sides mustn't quarrel. The people of Yuanmao should treat their guests from Minhsin to a good meal.' Yes, a meal is ready. We haven't anything good to eat. But there's plenty of bread and sauce. Tuck in, friends, before the sun sets."

After eating, the Minhsin villagers used some of their sledges

to transport the hay and bean-cakes, some of the men footing it home, crunching over the snow. All Yuanmao turned out to see them off, beating gongs and drums, singing songs. It was bitterly cold, and snow was falling. The wind whistled into men's sleeves and collars, blinding their eyes, freezing their feet and covering their beards with fine icicles.

XI

AFTER the visit from the Minhsin peasants, the people of Yuanmao searched out more valuables stowed away in and out of Snatcher Tang's house. In other landlords' houses, in stables, hen-roosts, under trellises and in the most unlikely places, they discovered grain, cloth, clothes and many other things. Some landlords, knowing only too well that their days were numbered, still treated the poor as their enemies. Rather than hand out their valuables and grain, they destroyed them or let them rot. But they were defeated—their goods and guns were unearthed.

Li Chen-chiang, the rich peasant, was called by the people "the landlords' tail." All that year, he had used every possible means to conceal his true character, raising pigs in the courtyard, chickens in the rooms, pretending to work hard for a living and to be an honest man who was badly off. But, some members of the Children's League discovered that he had secret dealings with the landlords and was passing information to Li Kuei-yung who was now under surveillance.

Li Chen-chiang had no love for the land reform workers, whose coming had meant that six of his eight horses had been made over to poor peasants and farmhands. But he was lying low for the time being, watching and waiting. After his class status had been fixed, he started becoming active again. When he heard that mistakes had been made in dealing with one or two middle peasants, he felt pleased and secretly hoped all middle peasants would come over to his side.

A well-to-do middle peasant by the name of Hu Tien-wen was classified by mistake as a small rich peasant, and deprived of two of his four horses. This gave rise to rumours, which soon spread through the whole village. Some remarked: "Middle peasants are

like porkers on New Year's Eve—their end is just a question of time.” Some added: “The policy is to kill fat pigs first and then sucking pigs.” Every middle peasant who heard this gossip went to the Peasants’ Association with a request to have his property confiscated. Some said: “Please take my belongings.” Some suggested: “If you’re going to seal up my things sooner or later, why not now?” One dropped in on Old Chu and demanded: “Old Chu, I’ve got a cotton quilt left. Confiscate it.” Rumours continued to spread to the effect that out of every two horses one must be surrendered and out of every two cotton-padded quilts one must be given up. When poor peasants and farm labourers held meetings, middle peasants were not asked to join and so they became more suspicious. Their wives gossiped in the kitchen:

“After they’ve made a clean sweep of the landlords, it’ll be our turn.”

“Ah! I can see it coming!”

Some middle peasants suddenly became lazy, sleeping with the sun shining on their backs. At night, they did not trouble to feed their horses, which consequently became nothing but skin and bones, scarcely able to stand.

Some middle peasants, who had been thrifty before, now lived like spendthrifts. “Let’s eat and drink, and tomorrow we shan’t suffer.” They began by killing fat pigs and eating big slices of pork at every meal, and ended by throwing in sucking pigs too. They said: “We don’t want to raise porkers for others to eat.”

Some middle peasants took a leaf out of the landlords’ book—they stowed away all their quilts, cotton-padded coats, *kang* blankets and mats. In the winter, their *kang* were bare of mats and quilts, and their children cried with cold all night. All their women came down with flu.

Li Chen-chiang’s wife, who had kept quiet at first, now went out to make calls. She would go to the house of a middle peasant, pretending that she wanted to borrow a light or a bowl—at first she would simply heave a sigh or two and remain silent; but then she would feign surprise and exclaim: “What! You don’t have a quilt in such a cold winter!” Thus goaded, middle peasants felt more and more sorry for themselves.

Team Leader Hsiao wrote from Sanchia asking the Peasants’ Association of Yuanmao to report on the conditions of middle peasants.

ants there. Kuo gathered some information from the women's groups and the Children's League, then set out on horseback to Sanchia to report to Hsiao. He attended a conference of Party activists. After analysing Kuo's report, Hsiao told the Party members that henceforth it was important for them to unite with middle peasants. Army dependents and activists in different villages were to contact middle peasants, listen to their opinions, and do everything possible to prevent bad elements from sowing seeds of discord between poor peasants and farmhands on the one hand and middle peasants on the other.

Upon his return to Yuanmao, Kuo began preparing for this new phase of the work. The lunar New Year was at hand. The village was still seething. In the rooms where the small groups were settling accounts, the lights burned throughout the night and tobacco smoke curled up to the beams. The activists worked until the cock-crow.

Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, and Big Li had joined up as stretcher-bearers. Liu's wife was honest and industrious, and could do the work of a man. She had joined one of the women's groups. But later, influenced by the rumours, she became suspicious and stopped taking an active part. After the well-to-do middle peasant Hu Tien-wen became a marked man, she lost heart even more and stopped going to the Peasants' Association.

Then Li Chen-chiang's wife started dropping in to chat with Mrs. Liu. Sucking a long stemmed pipe, Mrs. Li would ensconce herself comfortably on the *kang*, folding up one leg and drawing up the other on the *kang* edge. She usually started with a loud sigh:

"Ah! Who knows what will happen tomorrow?"

Mrs. Liu answered calmly:

"I've nothing to be afraid of. My man is at the front—that means we are on their side."

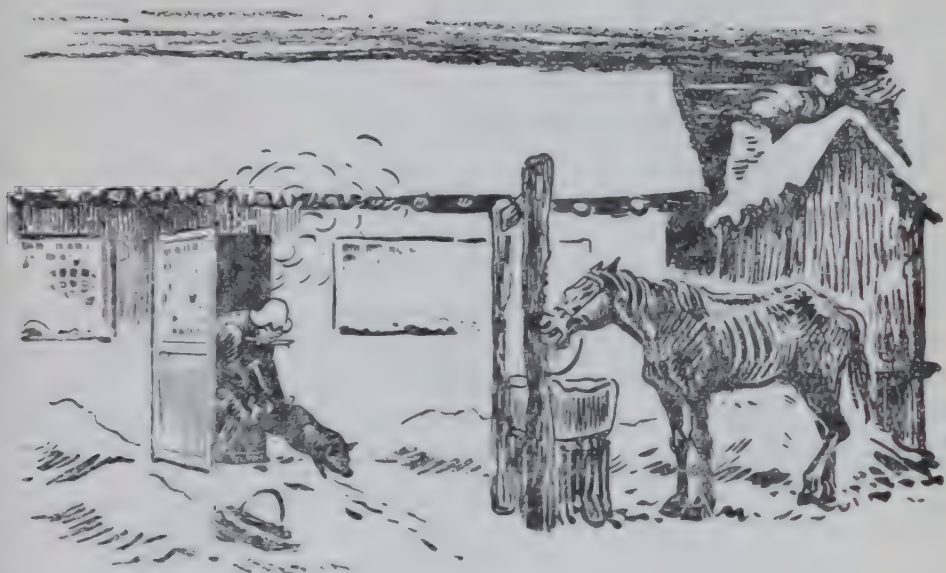
Mrs. Li laughed icily:

"Do you think that counts for anything? No, your turn will come too. Are any of the powerful men in the Peasants' Association middle peasants?"

Mrs. Liu said:

"No, none of them."

Mrs. Li drew nearer and said:



They began by killing fat pigs . . . and ended by
throwing in sucking pigs too.



"Everything that goes on in their meetings is a watertight secret. We who are a bit better off are left in the dark."

Mrs. Liu agreed:

"They used to call us to meetings. But now, no one bothers about us."

"We've no part and no say at any important meeting, but we have to help pay for all their meals and fares."

"Yes."

Having won Mrs. Liu's confidence, Mrs. Li began to tell tall tales:

"As if paying through the nose wasn't bad enough, in the next village some middle peasants were put behind the bars."

Mrs. Liu's parents were middle peasants, living in the neighbouring village. For a moment she was taken aback. But, a moment's thought convinced her that this could not be true, for her brother, who had visited her the previous day, had said nothing about it. She asked:

"Who was it?"

Mrs. Li lied:

"Old Shih."

Mrs. Liu raised her head to glance at Mrs. Li, and countered:

"But in our village there is no family of that name!"

In spite of the fact that she had been married for about twenty years, Mrs. Liu was still in the habit of calling her native village "our village." Her bluff called, Mrs. Li quickly corrected herself:

"No? Then, I forget the name. Anyway, this government's policy is quite beyond us."

Mrs. Liu nodded again in agreement. After a few more insinuations, Mrs. Li put her long pipe into her mouth and hobbled out of the house. She had succeeded in depressing Mrs. Liu and planting doubts in her mind. Mrs. Liu brooded over the fact that Hu Tien-wen, who was a middle peasant like her husband, only possessing one horse more, had, nevertheless, been attacked. Perhaps her neighbour had been telling the truth. Worry made her spend a sleepless night. First thing next morning, she led a mare and a colt to the Peasants' Association—better surrender them voluntarily rather than be attacked and lose face. But the Peasants' Association refused to take the animals, and Old Chu said:

"Keep them yourself for the time being." At this she turned pale, remembering that some time before, when a landlord offered to hand over a piece of land, an officer of the Peasants' Association had said exactly the same thing: "Keep it yourself for the time being." That meant that they would take her horses later. As she led her horses home, she could not help remembering what Mrs. Li had said the day before:

"Who knows what will happen tomorrow!"

That night, when the stars were high in the sky, Liu Teh-shan's wife was still tossing and turning on the *kang*, unable to sleep. Suddenly she heard someone at the door. Who could it be, at this time of night? It was a woman's voice. She remembered how, at one meeting she had attended, the villagers had sent a woman to rap at the door of a landlord at midnight. She was beginning to panic as the raps became louder and quicker. As she clambered off the *kang* and got into her cotton-padded coat, she heard: "Mrs. Liu, it's me. Why don't you open the door?" It was a familiar and soothing voice, and she answered:

"Is that you, Mrs. Chao?"

She ran to unbolt the door. She suddenly felt light-hearted and was very glad to see the wife of Chao Yu-lin, who was an honest, good-hearted woman, with whom she could always talk heart to heart. Mrs. Liu led her into the room, brushed the snow off her clothes and shoes and invited her to sit on the *kang*. Mrs. Chao sat down, cross-legged, to play with the baby. Soon, the two women were talking nineteen to the dozen. Mrs. Chao asked:

"How long is it since your husband left for the front?"

Relieved at this question, Mrs. Liu took out a basket of tobacco and a stemmed pipe; she filled the bowl with a pinch of tobacco, and answered serenely:

"Over three months. Four months is said to be the period of service. It's about time he returned."

When she was offering the guest the stemmed pipe, Mrs. Chao said with a smile:

"No, thank you. Have a smoke yourself. Mr. Liu deserves a merit for his service."

Puffing at her pipe, Mrs. Liu thought to herself: "No demerit is good news. Don't expect a merit." But she answered:

"It's his duty to fight the Kuomintang bandits. A little service isn't worth mentioning."

Mrs. Chao admired some shoe-designs and needlework done by Mrs. Liu. Then, she said kindly:

"I haven't seen you lately at the Peasants' Association. You surely haven't lost interest in the political work against the landlords, have you?"

Mrs. Liu blew out a puff of smoke, heaved a deep sigh and then answered:

"I think it's poor peasants and farmhands who run the show. We middle peasants have the wrong status."

Mrs. Chao answered quickly:

"Who says your status is no good?"

Mrs. Liu wanted to answer: "Mrs. Li says so," but thought better of it and said:

"Nobody says so. But since our class status was fixed, we middle peasants haven't been very active. You poor peasants and farmhands are in power. What you say goes. You're the authorities."

Mrs. Chao cut her short to say good-humouredly:

"What do you mean, authorities? You've still got the old ideas!"

"Say what you may, our position isn't too good. We're afraid, and don't dare make a move. We don't know whom to fight, whom to let off. We dare not speak, dare not criticize."

Mrs. Chao caught up:

"Don't you worry. Chairman Mao Tse-tung says: 'Blame not him who speaks.' Don't you remember?"

Mrs. Liu knocked the bowl of her pipe against the *kang* edge, refilled it with a fresh pinch of tobacco, lighted it at the flame of the bean-oil lamp and answered without lifting her eyes:

"You poor peasants and farmhands manage the affairs of the village. Even the Women's Association is run by you. Where do we middle peasants come in?"

Mrs. Chao put in anxiously:

"Why do you keep saying 'you' and 'we' as if we didn't belong together? Poor peasants, farmhands and middle peasants are all one family. They have a lot in common. We've got a telegram service to Chairman Mao. And today we received a letter from

Team Leader Hsiao saying that Chairman Mao had sent a telegram¹ saying we must be sure to unite with the middle peasants and not allow anybody to harm them."

Mrs. Liu took the pipe out of her mouth, looked up and asked: "Is it true?"

Mrs. Chao answered, smiling:

"Do you think I'd fool you?"

Mrs. Liu asked again:

"Has Chairman Mao actually mentioned us middle peasants?"

Mrs. Chao affirmed:

"Do you think Team Leader Hsiao isn't telling the truth? A newspaper in Harbin has published Chairman Mao's words."

Mrs. Liu could not help smiling light-heartedly. She puffed noisily at her pipe for a time, then said:

"I've always said Chairman Mao wouldn't let us down. We middle peasants struggled and suffered for generations. During the puppet Manchukuo regime, the landlords shifted all the taxes and expenses onto middle peasants and poor peasants. My husband hated the landlords too, but he's a simple, timid fellow, and he didn't dare do anything about it."

The conversation became more and more friendly. Mrs. Liu fished out of a case a dish of popped corn and a dish of sunflower seeds, placed them on the table, and turned to boil a kettle of water to make fried-rice tea. She was going all out to entertain the guest. Mrs. Chao said as she cracked a sunflower seed:

"Before I forget, Team Leader Hsiao has sent a letter asking middle peasants in Yuanmao to say frankly what their difficulties are. It's no use grumbling privately. He also says, poor peasants and farmhands are the bones and middle peasants are the flesh. So, we're as close as bones and flesh. Just speak straight out, and don't worry. Tell whatever difficulties you have."

Mrs. Liu answered, smiling:

"We don't have any difficulties." She thought a while, and went on: "Only the last few months we've had more than our share of transport service. In future, those who have horses should divide the burden fairly."

¹Referring to "The Present Situation and Our Tasks," a report made by Comrade Mao Tse-tung to a meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on December 25, 1947.

Mrs. Chao promised to transmit Mrs. Liu's opinion to Kuo. They continued to chat, and then Mrs. Liu got off the *kang* and said to Mrs. Chao:

"Excuse me. I won't be long."

She went out, pushed open the door of the outer room, stepped out under the eaves and looked around. The courtyard was silvery with snow, without a sound or a shadow. Mrs. Liu returned to the inner room, sat cross-legged on the *kang* again and told Mrs. Chao in whispers all that the wife of Li Chen-chiang had said to her. Mrs. Chao told her to report to the Peasants' Association if ever the Li woman came to spread rumours again. Mrs. Chao said:

"Tomorrow, Chairman Kuo is calling a meeting of poor peasants, farmhands and middle peasants. It's going to be a meeting for unity. The present Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League will be dissolved, and middle peasants and tenant middle peasants can join the Peasants' Association too. Be sure to go. At the meeting, we'll discuss how to divide pork and wheat. Chairman Kuo says: 'New Year is drawing near, and we must give all the poor men some of the landlords' pork, wheat and chickens, so that there will be dumplings in every house to celebrate the New Year.'"

Mrs. Chao rose to go, and Mrs. Liu was going to light a glass lantern for her, when the visitor stopped her, saying:

"No need for a lantern. The snow is bright enough. What should I want a lantern for?"

Mrs. Liu had lost her heart to this woman who had a heart of gold. She walked with her to the gate and followed her with her eyes until Mrs. Chao was lost to sight in the fluttering snow. Then Mrs. Liu bolted the door, returned to the *kang* and went happily to sleep.

XII

A MEETING to unite the poor peasants, farmhands and middle peasants of Yuanmao Village was called. The Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League was dissolved, and middle peasants also joined the Peasants' Association. Kuo Chuan-hai was elected its chairman, and of its seven committee members two were middle

peasants. The Association called for a halt in the search for landlords' property, so that the peasants could prepare to celebrate the lunar New Year, and shares of pork and wheat were distributed. Every poor peasant or farmhand was given ten catties of pork and five *sheng*¹ of wheat, while every middle peasant was given three catties of pork and one *sheng* of wheat. The middle peasants had no objection to this arrangement. They all had porkers and wheat of their own; and their families were large, so that each family received several shares. In fact, if the family was taken as the unit, the middle peasants received almost as much as the poor peasants and farmhands. And most of the poor peasants and farmhands had not even grain seeds for the next year.

After the distribution of pork and wheat, Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan were walking home through the wind and snow, discussing what presents should be given to army dependents on New Year's Day. Liu Kuei-lan suggested:

"This time, we should do things differently. It wouldn't do to repeat what we did on the Moon Festival—a flat distribution of ten catties of pork and ten catties of flour for each soldier's family. Some of the families may want cloth instead of pork. This time, we've plenty of confiscated property for presents. But we must find out first which family wants what, and give what they want. For instance, Mrs. Chao's So-chu goes about barefoot; if we make him a present of shoes, I'm sure they'll be pleased."

"That's a good idea; we'll bring it up at the meeting tomorrow. I had nearly forgotten—tomorrow will be the twenty-fourth of the twelfth month and you had better go and see Mrs. Chao now. Get her to relax and go out with you. Don't let her stay indoors all the time, pining for her husband. I'll go home first to light the fire under the *kang*."

Liu Kuei-lan went to Mrs. Chao's house. When she stepped into the room, she saw Mrs. Chao wiping her eyes in the dim light of the bean-oil lamp. So-chu jumped off the *kang*, grabbed the hem of Liu Kuei-lan's coat and pulled her up to the *kang*. She sat down on the *kang* cross-legged, and began to tell him stories—she described how a neighbour's small pig had been carried off by a wolf, how another neighbour's hen had laid eggs without cack-

¹ A *sheng* is equal to 0.5 kilogramme.

ling, and she also repeated Old Sun's favourite story about the fight between a tiger and a bear. Little So-chu laughed and laughed, and his mother smiled to see him happy. The whole room seemed merry. Then, So-chu produced a pair of scissors and several pieces of coloured paper, placed them on the low-legged table, took Liu Kuei-lan's hand and asked her to cut out window patterns. She cut out a blue duck, a green pig and a red peony flower. So-chu got some paste from his mother, and Liu Kuei-lan stuck the red flower in the middle of the windowpane, the blue duck on the left side, and the green pig on the right. Suddenly the little swineherd Wu came in, brushing the snow off his clothes. When he saw the patterns on the window, he exclaimed:

"It means that the duck and the pig are enjoying the peony."

This remark caused a ripple of merriment in the room. When Liu Kuei-lan rose to go, So-chu tugged at her sleeve and demanded another pattern.

"Sister, cut out a little swineherd to look after the little pig, so that the little pig won't be eaten by a big wolf."

Liu Kuei-lan pointed at Wu Chia-fu and declared:

"Look! There is your little swineherd."

But So-chu would not let go of her, arguing: "No, he won't do. He's too big."

Liu Kuei-lan wriggled out of the little boy's grip. Out in the yard, she shouted back over her shoulder:

"Little So-chu, you wait! I'll come again and give you some more scissor-cuts. Don't cry!"

XIII

MRS. Pai made her way home in the snow and wind. She opened the door and stepped into the darkness inside. Before she had lighted the lamp, something jumped off the *kang* with a thud. Frightened, she was turning to run, when a voice called after her:

"Shu-ying, it's me!"

Hearing the familiar voice, she stopped; but she could not speak, because her heart was thumping so hard. Pai caught hold of her and hugged her. She cursed him, giggling:

"Plague take you! What fright you gave me! I thought it was a bad man."

She took his muscular hand and held it against her warm, tender breast, which was rising and falling with the rapid beating of her heart. Big flakes of snow were fluttering noiselessly in the courtyard. Women in the neighbourhood were singing songs. The two of them stayed in each other's arms for some time, then Mrs. Pai, freeing herself from his grip, asked:

"When did you get back?"

He answered:

"I've been waiting for you here a long time, nearly rubbing off the seat of my trousers. You must have been calling on neighbours again, coming back so late."

Mrs. Pai answered with a grin:

"Well said! You think I have time to call on neighbours?"

She went back into the inner room to light the lamp.

Earlier in the week, Pai Yu-shan had written to say that he was coming home for the New Year; nevertheless, he had taken her by surprise. Even a woman of strong character will be sweet to her husband when he comes home after a long absence. But this pleasant mood did not last long. Mrs. Pai lighted the lamp with a hemp stem and took another glance at her strong, smiling husband. Raising her beautiful, black brows and pursing her lips, she murmured:

"Once you left me, you forgot me. Only one letter during the whole year."

"Could I leave my work and spend all my time writing letters? You're as backward as ever."

His last remark hurt her. She was about to make an angry retort, when she remembered that he had only just got back—it would look bad to start scrapping straight away. She lighted a hemp stem and went to make fire to heat the *kang* in the outer room. The portion of pork she had taken home still lay on the table, unminced, uncooked. She had been terribly busy lately—too busy to cook or clean house. She backward? That was unfair. Ever since her husband started working for the government, she had had a warm feeling for all government workers. She had done the jobs assigned her by the Peasants' Association as carefully as she would have done her own work. Chang Fu-ying and Li Kuei-yung had mismanaged the Peasants' Association, misappropriating the gains of struggle, drinking and playing about

with loose women. Mrs. Pai had once marched to the Peasants' Association at the head of a troop of brave women. She had stood in the middle of the courtyard and given Chang Fu-ying a severe trouncing: "What sort of official are you? A good official or a muddle-headed booby? You play with bad women in your office and make a mess of everything. All day long, you drink and gamble, and think that you can always fool us." Li Kuei-yung had declared that she was mad, and ordered two militiamen to shoo her away. She had since severed her relations with the Peasants' Association. Liu Kuei-lan had been insulted and oppressed by her father-in-law, and Mrs. Pai had given her asylum and defended her. Later on, when the land reform workers came back, she and Liu Kuei-lan had taken part in the search for hidden property and in the fight against bad eggs, working day and night. She had become one of the most progressive women in Yuanmao. Yet, here was her husband saying that she was backward! She felt terribly wronged. But she was not going to tell him about herself. Let him misunderstand her and see what happened.

Pai placed the bean-oil lamp on the low-legged table, took out a notebook and a fountain-pen, and began writing. He had learned to write and saved up to buy a second-hand fountain-pen. He never let slip an opportunity to use this pen. Mrs. Pai brought a brazier into the room. She saw Pai bending over the table, writing. He was in a blue, cotton-padded uniform, moving his brawny arms weightily and slowly, painstakingly writing like a proper government worker. Her anger vanished. She sat down on the *kang* edge, and asked with a tender smile:

"Shall I get you something to eat? Don't you feel like eating?"

Without stopping writing, he shook his head and answered:

"No, I don't want anything. Have you joined the Women's Association?" He was bending his head over the notebook, without looking up. To pull his leg, she answered:

"No. What for?"

At this, Pai put down his pen and his face fell. He frowned at her:

"What for? Don't you even know what for?"

Mrs. Pai answered mischievously:

"I don't. You've been away so long. Nobody has bothered to teach me."

"You should have asked for help, then."

"If I had, you would have said that I was wasting my time, visiting people."

Pai sighed and said:

"How maddening you are! In Shuangcheng all the women government workers are able and active and not afraid to speak. But here you are with your old ideas unchanged. If ever you came with me to Shuangcheng, I'd lose face completely. What shall I do with such a backward wife?"

His reference to the women of Shuangcheng piqued her. Her smile faded, as she answered:

"All right, so I'm backward; you can do what you like about it. Go ahead and find yourself an able and active woman who's not afraid to speak."

Seeing how jealous she was, Pai said with a smile:

"If you don't join the Women's Association, how can you fight feudalism? We must all try to overcome individualism and stick together. Fighting single-handed doesn't amount to much. You had better do some self-criticism; you won't make headway unless you do."

This was the first time Mrs. Pai had heard the phrase "overcome individualism." She decided the work in the Shuangcheng public security bureau had done her husband some good. He spoke differently now. Encouraged, she thought she might as well give him another test, to see whether he was up to Team Leader Hsiao, for instance. She went on talking in an even more backward way:

"Sticking together, do you say? What use is that? Poor men will always be poor, rich men will always be rich. Whether you're rich or poor depends on fate. Some people eat well all the year round, though they never carry a load on the shoulder or a basket in the hand. Poor men rise early, sleep late, and never stop working. What happens? Year after year, generation after generation, they starve and freeze. What's the reason, if not fate?"

Pai broke into a laugh and commented:

"I see, you've become a fortune-teller!" He chose not to answer her directly. Instead, assuming a very learned air, he asked her:

"Do you know the meaning of the word *exploitation*?"

"No, I don't." Mrs. Pai smiled.

As a matter of fact, she knew the meaning quite well. When the peasants tackled Goodman Tu, they had settled "exploitation accounts" with him. She could remember clearly how the small-pox physician had pushed his abacus under the landlord's nose. Now, she feigned ignorance in order to see how wise her husband was. Tickled by her own fib, she wanted to laugh. Pai seriously proceeded to explain what he had learned at the Party training school.

"The landlord takes away the fruits of your labour. He flays you. That's exploitation."

Mrs. Pai was suddenly at a loss. She understood flaying. The puppet Manchukuo officials had demanded cat skins from the people and she herself had flayed a cat, though it made her hands tremble and her head swim. But "fruits of labour" was beyond her. Knowing she did not understand, Pai went on:

"Let's take this for instance. You've a picul of maize, and your landlord takes three or four *tou*¹ away. He hasn't worked to produce that maize, yet he claims it as rent in kind. And this rent in kind is the fruit of your labour, isn't it? It comes from your rising early, sleeping late, sweating and struggling."

"But the land belongs to the landlord, doesn't it?"

"Haven't you even heard that land belongs to the tiller?"

Mrs. Pai answered, smiling:

"No. I've never been to a Party training school like you."

"Well, every piece of land was opened up by some poor man, and worked by the sweat of his brow. But the plump, white landlord claims that the land is his. Now we are dividing up his land, so that the land goes back to its rightful owners. Besides, land is useless without labour. If you didn't plough it, plant it, weed it and work on it, you couldn't produce half a grain of kaoliang even if you had one hundred thousand *mou* of good land."

Mrs. Pai nodded. She knew only too well what it meant to weed and plant.

Pai went on:

"And houses, food, clothes are all created by labour. What do you mean by fate? Fate was invented by the landlords to deceive us poor men."

¹ A *tou* is one-tenth of a *tan* (picul) which is 50 kilogrammes. Ten *sheng* make a *tou*.

Mrs. Pai had been drinking in every word. Now she asked another question:

"No fate? And no gods? That's hard to believe. If there are no wind and rain spirits, and angels to spread clouds, what causes wind and rain? Without gods, how could there be thunder and lightning?"

Pai burst out laughing. He had learned the answer to this. He hastened to tell her:

"Clouds and rain are water vapours rising from the ground, running up to the sky. Thunder and lightning are nothing but electricity, like the hydroelectricity in Hsiao-fengman. The Hsiao-fengman electricity is also created by poor men's labour."

At this juncture, Liu Kuei-lan swept into the room like a puff of wind. Pai recognized her, although she was minus the two plaits of hair which she had formerly worn. Now, in the dim light of the bean-oil lamp, her bobbed hair appeared like a tassel of fine, black silk, covering the nape of her neck. She was wearing a grey, cotton-padded gown, and a pair of deerskin sandals laced with reeds. Running in from outside, she had flushed cheeks. She smiled and giggled, then greeted Pai with a nod of her head and said:

"Your laughter could be heard for miles around. When did you get back, Brother Pai?"

Pai answered, with a smile:

"Just a while ago. Get on the *kang* and warm yourself."

Liu Kuei-lan walked up to the *kang* and said to Pai:

"How Mrs. Pai has been pining for you! Only last night, she was grumbling again: 'He said he was coming home, but he hasn't. And he hasn't written home either. Once he left, he forgot his home.'" She turned to Mrs. Pai and added:

"Well, Mrs. Pai, your dream has come true!" Then she told Pai:

"Brother Pai, you don't know how able Mrs. Pai is! She's one of the best members of our women's group. She takes the lead in tackling landlords, digging up gold and silver, unearthing guns. She's clever and brave. Old Sun says: 'I'm fifty-one this year, and I'll be fifty-two next year; I've been everywhere, but never have I seen a woman as capable as Mrs. Pai.' And Mrs. Chao says: 'Mrs. Pai is a real heroine and a credit to us army dependents.' Even Chairman Kuo says, 'She's a match for any man.'"

Mrs. Pai cut her short, and laughingly scolded her:

"Little imp, what a tongue you have!" She was going to pinch the girl, when Liu Kuei-lan pleaded:

"Good sister, don't pinch me! Tell me what you are giving Brother Pai to welcome him home. They say it is dumplings for a send-off and noodles for a home-coming. Are you eating noodles?"

Pai answered with a chuckle:

"She's given me no noodles. She's given me a good scolding instead."

Liu Kuei-lan caught up:

"Her scolding is a sham, but her love is true."

"Wait till I lay hands on you!" threatened Mrs. Pai and broke into laughter. She was trying to catch hold of Liu Kuei-lan, when the girl slipped out of the room into the yard. It was snowing. Liu Kuei-lan stepped under the eaves and called through the frosted window:

"Goodbye, Mrs. Pai. Don't go off your head with joy."

Mrs. Pai asked from inside:

"Where are you going to?"

"To Mrs. Chao's, to sleep there."

Pai ran out after Liu Kuei-lan and handed her a quilt. Tucking the thin quilt under her arm, she set off through the snow. Her footfalls gradually died away, and all was quiet again except for the wind. The light was blown out in the room. And, an hour later, Pai was snoring away.

The next morning, Mrs. Pai got up first and went to work in the Peasants' Association. Kuo told her, smiling:

"Go home at once. There is no work for you here, today. I know your heart is in your home."

Mrs. Pai beamed, as she retorted:

"Nonsense!" But she was already halfway through the door. Kuo shouted after her:

"Ask Brother Pai to come to see us. Don't keep him all to yourself. He ought to remember his friends."

When Mrs. Pai reached home, Pai was still snoring away. She rolled up her sleeves, kindled the stove, boiled a pot of water and put in a piece of pork to cook. She had bobbed her hair too. In her blue jacket over a cotton-padded blue gown, she looked neat and pretty. Since taking part in village affairs, Mrs. Pai had

changed. She no longer knit her black brows in anxious thought, although she had missed her husband very much. Now he was back, she was happy. While listening to his rhythmic breathing, she minced the meat for dumplings and sang a song called *Kite-flying*.

At last, Pai woke and sat up. He put on his clothes, washed his face and went off to the Peasants' Association. There he had a good talk with Kuo, after which he came home to eat. After the midday meal, Kuo, Chang Ching-shui, Old Sun and many other village officers and friends came to see him. Pai's gate and rooms suddenly became too narrow for the stream of visitors. Husband and wife treated each other more affectionately than before. In the past, Mrs. Pai had looked down upon her husband as muddle-headed lazy-bones, not as quick and clever as herself. Now, he was a new man. Though he slept till late, he had stopped sleeping in the daytime. He was more alert than before—he even advised his wife to be on her guard against reactionaries. He could talk with the other men sensibly and argue reasonably, and they all seemed to respect him. After the visitors had gone, Pai pulled out of his old case a portrait of Chairman Mao Tse-tung and two New-Year pictures, which he had bought in the train. One bore the caption "The United Democratic Army Launches a Counter-Offensive"; and the other, "Distribution of Fruits of Labour." Pai made some paste and stuck up the two pictures on the wall above the *kang*. And he went into the kitchen and tore down from the wall above the stove the smoke-blackened picture of the kitchen god and the slip of smoke-blackened red paper bearing the words: "Master of the House." The kitchen god and the red paper were thrust into the stove and burnt together. Then Pai remembered something else—he went into the inner room and pulled down another piece of red paper on which was written "The Shrine of Three Generations of Ancestors of the Pai Family." In the vacated place he put up the portrait of Chairman Mao.

Then, he turned to his wife and explained:

"Thanks to Chairman Mao, we poor men have stood up. He is our saint. He is our kinsman. If not for him, we could never have overthrown our oppressors, not even after a hundred years' worship of the 'Master of the House' and 'Three Generations of Ancestors.'" Pai concluded by saying: "We must raise our cultural level and destroy the feudalism in our minds."

Mrs. Pai began a publicity campaign along the lines laid down

by her husband. She urged her neighbours to buy the portrait of Chairman Mao and New-Year pictures, and to tear down the kitchen god. And she concluded like her husband:

"We must raise our cultural level and destroy the feudalism in our minds."

The women's group later took on the new function of a literacy class, with the smallpox physician as the teacher. But that is another story.

XIV

LIU Kuei-lan now stayed with Mrs. Chao. She still went to the Peasants' Association during the day, and at night she did needle-work and occasionally clipped paper-cuts for So-chu. The time passed pleasantly, and New Year's Day was at hand.

On the 29th of the twelfth moon, when Liu Kuei-lan came home from the literacy class and was helping Mrs. Chao to make dumplings for New Year's Day, her mother-in-law hobbled in and asked the girl to go home with her. Sitting in the doorway between the two rooms and sucking a stemmed pipe, the old lady said:

"You had better come home with me. It wouldn't do to be away from home on New Year's Day." As she remonstrated with her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Tu cast a sidelong glance at Mrs. Chao.

Liu Kuei-lan answered decidedly:

"I'm not going."

Mrs. Tu puffed at her pipe, forced a smile and said:

"If you're away on New Year's Day, our relatives will laugh at us. It's all right to do revolutionary work, but you mustn't forget your family. Come home with me, if only for the New Year. On the fifth day of the first moon, you can come back and go on with your work. You've always been a good, obedient girl. Mrs. Chao, won't you help me to talk her round?"

Mrs. Chao remained silent. Liu Kuei-lan thought to herself: "It's too late for that honey-sweet talk." She remembered her ten-year-old husband who still wetted the bed, and her father-in-law with his bristling whiskers. Her mother-in-law had once struck her with a hoe when she was working in the fields, and her sister-in-law had often hurt her with unkind words. The night of her flight from the Tu house was still fresh in her mind: It had been

pouring. She had run into the courtyard, heard the howls of wolves, clambered onto the maize crate and cried all night, cold, angry and heart-broken. All this she would remember as long as she lived. So she shook her head and declared:

"No, I'd rather die than go back."

Finding the girl so stubborn, Mrs. Tu wiped the smile off her face, knocked the bowl of her pipe against the threshold and said with a frown:

"Whether you'll come home or not is not for you to decide. You belong to our family. We paid a good sum of money for you, and there were go-betweens and witnesses. I'm your mother-in-law and have the right to control you, otherwise you would have no laws to obey."

Liu Kuei-lan, putting down a dumpling, countered:

"Who disobeys the laws?"

Mrs. Chao put in:

"Old lady, what do you mean? Liu Kuei-lan is deputy leader of the literacy class. She's active and selfless. How can you say that she doesn't obey the laws? It is true, she disobeys the laws of the landlords."

So-chu was playing on the *kang*, brandishing a stick. When he heard his mother arguing with that old woman Tu, he threw down the stick, jumped off the *kang*, gave the old woman a push and swore:

"Get out, old cow!"

The old woman did not budge. She puffed at her pipe and said insistently:

"She's one of our family. On New Year's Day and festivals, we've the right to call her home."

Mrs. Chao smiled, but her voice was firm as she said:

"You forced her to leave, now you want her back. Are you trying to ruin her?"

Liu Kuei-lan bent her head over the dumplings again. As she kneaded, she said:

"When New Year's over, I'm going to join the revolution; then you won't be able to say that I belong to the Tu family."

Mrs. Tu answered with an icy smile:

"You can't frighten us with that. We've given land; that means we have joined too."

Liu Kuei-lan raised her head to say:

"What do you mean, you've joined? During the Manchukuo regime, your family worked for the enemy, and after the Japanese surrender you hitched up with the landlords. What you did and said then—do you think we don't know? Our Peasants' Association and Women's Association haven't had time yet to dig up your dirty roots. And here you're bragging about joining the revolution!"

"What did I do and what did I say?" The old woman put on a bold face, thinking that her daughter-in-law, who had always been timid, would not dare to speak the truth. She glared at the girl furiously. Liu Kuei-lan had heard Team Leader Hsiao say that only the big landlords should be fought while the sub-landlords and small landlords would be dealt with later on. Her father-in-law being a sub-landlord, she had not hitherto thought of accusing him. Now that her mother-in-law was pretending to be innocent and even taunting her, Liu Kuei-lan was furious. She declared:

"One day, ten months ago, you said, 'Now you may swagger about. Just wait until the "Central Army" comes back, and then all your heads will be chopped off.'"

The old lady turned pale, her lips trembling. She now knew there was no chance of the "Central Army" ever coming back. She said hastily:

"That's a lie!"

Meanwhile, neighbours had heard the row and come to look on. Among them were Old Chu and Old Sun. Emboldened, Liu Kuei-lan continued:

"That's what you said—you can't deny it. Those were **your** very words. You were squatting before the stove in the kitchen, kindling the fire. You may have forgotten, but I haven't."

Mrs. Tu appealed to the public:

"Neighbours, you all know that our Tu family is heart and soul with the Eighth Route Army."

Liu Kuei-lan countered at once:

"Your mouth follows the Eighth Route Army, but your heart is with the bandits. Once you cursed the officers of the Peasants' Association: 'Let those asses stay where they are for a little while longer. When the "Central Army" comes, there will be plenty of accounts to settle with them.'"

At this Old Sun exclaimed:

"This is serious. If her words have such a sting in them, her thoughts must be full of revenge."

Old Chu also exploded:

"Let's tie up this old reactionary!"

Liu Kuei-lan said:

"I thought, since I had lived under their roof, I should forget the way they treated me; and, besides, I had no time to settle old scores with her. Now, look at her! She is challenging me." She unbuttoned her cotton-padded gown to show a scarlet scar on her left shoulder and explained: "One day in 1942, she blamed me for being too slow in mowing the grass, and she went and hacked at my shoulder with the hoe. Look at the scar here! It bled like anything. I had to stay in bed for seven days." Liu Kuei-lan rebuttoned her gown and continued: "She didn't send for a doctor, and it hurt so much that the whole *kang* was wet with my tears. She swore I was shamming, and said: 'While everybody is busy in the fields, you lie there idle. You don't earn your keep. And you weep over the least thing. You're no use at all.' She holds poor people so cheap."

When Liu Kuei-lan paused, Old Sun quickly chimed in:

"Now, let her see, who's cheap?"

Liu Kuei-lan went on:

"When Team Leader Hsiao returned to this village, I wanted to join the women's group, but she wouldn't let me. She threatened to strip off my clothes. With a cold smile, she said: 'You're in high demand, eh! All the officers of the Peasants' Association want you, don't they? Well, why not live with them and eat with them?' She had a lot to do with the women in Goodman Tu's house, and was afraid that I might come to know about the secret. So she wanted me out of her way."

Some people among the indignant crowd were going to tie the old woman up, when Kuo ran in and stopped them, advising them to hear Liu Kuei-lan out. When Liu Kuei-lan saw Kuo, she blushed, then went on:

"After the people had made me assistant leader of the women's group, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law began to treat me like a thorn in their flesh. My mother-in-law said: 'What sort of work is that? A kind of love-making, isn't it?' My sister-in-law said: 'She's an officer. Don't say anything. She may inform against us.'

One day, I had a headache during a meeting and came home earlier than usual. The room was dark, and I lay down on the *kang*. In a few minutes, footsteps were heard in the courtyard—it was mother and daughter coming home, too. Not knowing that I had come home before them, the old woman cursed me directly she crossed the threshold: ‘Damn her! She is happy now, she’s up on top. Just let her wait and see; a day will come when she won’t be on top any more.’ The young one saw somebody lying on the *kang*, thought it was me and stopped her mother, saying: ‘Mother, what are you talking about?’ She nudged her mother as a signal, and the old woman said: ‘I’m swearing at you. How dare I swear at anybody else.’”

Having heard all this, Kuo pushed his way through the throng, posted himself before the old woman and demanded:

“You said: ‘Some day she won’t be on top any more.’ What did you mean?”

The old woman looked up and saw to her great terror a big crowd of people surrounding her. She refused to admit that she had said any such thing. She stood up, turned to Liu Kuei-lan and said: “If you want to stay here, stay. I’m going home.” She was squeezing through the throng, when Kuo stood in her way. Winking, he said to Chang Ching-shui:

“Take this old lady to the literacy class. Let the women there search her. She isn’t so simple as she looks.”

In the classroom of the literacy class, Mrs. Pai, Liu Kuei-lan and many other women crowded around Mrs. Tu, who was frightened out of her wits. She was the target of their questions. They wanted to know her political views, and they asked her if she had guns stowed away. Pressed so hard, she rolled her eyes and stuttered:

“Guns I have none. I’m an old woman, what would I want guns for?”

Because her voice had faltered, several women demanded together:

“Then, what do you have? Tell us what you have, if not guns.”

“I have. . . .” She coughed, then broke off.

“What do you have?” demanded more voices together.

The old woman stammered:

“Goodman Tu gave me two gold rings to hide.”

“Where is it?” they asked in chorus.

The old woman whispered into Mrs. Pai's ear. Then Mrs. Pai called out:

"The men must go outside."

When only women remained, Mrs. Pai searched the old lady's trousers, and produced two gold rings. Old Sun was the first of the men to come back. As he looked at the rings, he nodded and affirmed:

"Yes, these are Goodman Tu's. I saw his first daughter-in-law wearing them on her wedding day. Where did the old lady hide them?"

Mrs. Pai answered:

"Why do you want to know?"

Mrs. Chao turned to the old woman and said: "You go home now, Mrs. Tu. We don't want to keep you or tie you up. But you must change your old ways of thinking. Work for an honest living. Don't be a tool for the big landlords."

XV

As a small sub-landlord, Small Tu had not hitherto attracted the attention of the masses. Even Kuo, who knew so much about conditions in the village, had not suspected him. But the fact that Mrs. Tu had hidden a pair of gold rings for Goodman Tu aroused the villagers' anger and suspicion. The activists met several times to discuss the matter, and agreed that, since the relatives and friends of the landlords had not been searched, a move should be made to investigate them. The fire of hatred which had been burning out now flared up again. But this time the peasants directed their attention to the landlords' stooges, relatives and sworn brothers, who had been keeping valuables and spreading rumours for landlords. The beams and pillars of feudalism had fallen down; now the rafters, doors, windows and walls had to go too.

Even during the New Year holiday, meetings were held to discuss the political and economic aspects of the struggle. The villagers divided into six groups, which met at the same time. In six places, six big double-wick lamps sizzled throughout the night. The man in charge of the lamps was the old bachelor Long-legs Hou. He had suffered from poverty in the old society and knew

what it was like to be poor. While running here and there to keep the lamps burning brightly, he grumbled: "These six lamps drink as much oil as six dragons would water!" Or he would declare with a sigh: "Another bottle gone, and the night is still young!"

No weapons had been discovered in the houses of the small fry. Gold and silver, clothes and cloth had been found; but these things were battered and tattered and did not amount to much. Having not slept properly for nights, most people were dozing off at the meetings. Some lay down on the *kang* and started snoring, some simply walked out. In three groups, only children remained to drag out the inquiry. Long-legs Hou remarked: "Oil is expensive, and we are poor men." Old Sun criticized: "This is no treasure hunt; this is dry-squeezing." Hearing such comments, Kuo immediately sent to Sanchia for Team Leader Hsiao's instructions.

Hsiao had received similar reports from some other villagers, and was considering the problem of this continued search which was producing no results. He agreed with Old Sun's description of it as "dry-squeezing." He suddenly recalled how somebody had said: "A leader must have an eye for everything. He must listen to everyone. Sometimes a casual remark made by somebody quite unimportant may be absolutely right." "Dry-squeezing" struck him as absolutely right. He knew this old carter liked to crack jokes. He recalled his tiger-and-bear story and, smiling, told himself: "A lot of his yarns are humbug, but this 'dry-squeezing' makes sense. The leadership has got to consider a change in tactics. Mass movements are involved, complex things; yet many people want to follow a straight, simple line—that's what makes them subjective."

Hsiao was in the habit of studying any new problem in the light of Chairman Mao's principles. He would look into a matter in all its aspects and bearings. Quite unassumingly and assiduously, he would gather information from the people and from his subordinates. Having done this, now, he wrote a report to the provincial Party committee, and a letter to two comrades in the county Party committee. He sent Wan to deliver the report and letter on horseback. Then, he sent five militiamen to the villages in Yuanmao District to summon the functionaries to a meeting the following day at Sanchia.

The next day, after breakfast, district and village officers from miles around reached Sanchia, some on foot, some by cart, some on horseback. Old Sun was among them, on the invitation of Team Leader Hsiao.

The meeting was to be held in the house of a middle peasant. While it was still early for the meeting, Hsiao wandered about in the village chatting with some villagers, asking their opinion. Some of them were for continuing the search, as they believed some small landlords still had considerable hoards. Others were against it as a waste of time, and they suggested that the time and energy of the peasants should be directed to plaiting *kang* mats, collecting firewood, making manure baskets, increasing production.

When the meeting started, they talked and argued. Some favoured continuing the search, others were against it. Old Sun took the floor too, gesticulating lavishly while he spoke. His proposal was not entirely pointless, but his main object was to make his hearers laugh.

Sitting on the edge of the *kang*, Hsiao jotted down in his notebook all the useful proposals made. After a while, he put down his pen and said:

"May I interrupt? Let me ask you, *why* are we fighting feudalism?"

Some replied: "To avenge ourselves." Some said: "To smash the landlords." Hsiao asked again:

"What are we fighting the landlords for?"

Some answered: "To put an end to exploitation." Some said: "So that the land may go back to the tillers." One man replied: "Because we want to sleep on a heated *kang*, to eat decent meals and live a decent life, with dumplings on New Year's Eve!" The audience broke into peals of laughter. Hsiao said with a smile:

"Yes, that's right. We've joined the revolution so that we can all live a decent life. But, how are we going to bring that about?"

The south and north *kang* were roasting hot. In addition, there was a brazier in the middle of the room. It was too hot. Old Chu stood up, wiped his eyebrows with his sleeve, unbuttoned his tattered sheepskin coat and said:

"If we get land and houses, horses to draw the plough, tools to till the land, we'll want nothing more."

"Want nothing more? You speak without thinking. I ask

you, do we want seeds?" This was from Chang Ching-shui, and Old Sun seized this opportunity to say:

"And we want carts, too. You thresh the grain and pile it up on the ground. If you don't have a cart, how are you going to take it home?"

Old Chu protested:

"If you include carts, then everything else should be included—a grindstone, for instance."

The carter answered:

"A cart comes first."

Old Chu countered:

"A grindstone comes before a cart."

Old Sun demanded:

"What good is your horse without a cart?"

Old Chu retorted:

"What good is your horse without a grindstone!"

Hsiao stood up, thumped the table with his fist, called everybody to order and explained:

"We can't do without grindstones, we can't do without carts. We mustn't go short of a single means of production. Now, the means of production have come from the hands of the idle landlords into the hands of the labouring people; that's why we say we've stood up. Now we can begin large-scale production. But there are not enough draught animals in this district, and we must use the gold and silver we've dug up to buy more."

Squatting on the *kang* and sucking a pipe, Kuo put in:

"If Yuanmao buys fifty or sixty draught animals, each poor peasant or farmhand will have one animal."

Hsiao continued:

"With draught animals, ploughing, grinding and carting will be easier. We must start dividing the land and movable property confiscated from the landlords so that we may do the spring sowing in good time; once the thaw starts, it will be too late. Time waits for no man. Some landlords may still have some things left, but so long as they can't fight back we needn't bother about them any more."

Taking his pipe from his mouth, Kuo remarked:

"What's left can't amount to much."

Hsiao asked them:

"What do you all think we should do first?"

At this moment, an orderly arrived from the county to deliver a letter to Team Leader Hsiao, who, after telling Kuo to preside over the meeting, tore open the letter and read it. The provincial Party committee had issued the following instructions: In the land reform movement, too general an attack had been made. It was essential now to limit the sphere of attack and to stop the onslaught against the middle peasants. The gains of the struggle and the land were to be distributed before the spring sowing in preparation for increasing production. The letter also said: "Workers in all counties and districts should study carefully the editorial 'High Tide and Leadership' which appeared in a recent issue of *The Northeast China Daily*."

Hsiao wrote a reply to the county. He asked the orderly whether he had met Wan on the way, but the man answered:

"No. I came from Yuanmao; he must have taken another route from Wuchia."

Hsiao said no more, but sent the orderly off. The meeting went on and they began to work on some statistics. On the average, eighty per cent of the peasants had taken part in the struggle against the landlords. Who were the remaining twenty per cent then? Figures issued by the Party Centre showed that the landlords and rich peasants only comprised eight per cent of the rural population. Of the additional twelve per cent, half were middle peasants who should never have been attacked. That mistake was now being corrected. But who formed the remaining six per cent? Kuo put in:

"There are people who take no interest in anything. For instance, old Mrs. Wang of Yuanmao has never shown up at any meeting."

Hsiao asked quickly:

"What kind of woman is she?"

Kuo answered:

"She's poor too. Her sons have been too poor to get married."

Old Sun said:

"You mean the Wangs of the east side? I know them. They were really poor. The five of them could never make ends meet. When the father died, they rolled him up in a mat and buried him—they couldn't afford a coffin. But one of her sons got married not long ago."

Hsiao asked:

"What's he doing for a living?"

Old Sun answered:

"He's a shoe-maker. His wife says: 'He has a trade. With him I shan't starve.' His eldest brother is a bachelor of nearly thirty, to whom no mother would like to marry her daughter."

Hsiao looked at Kuo and asked:

"Have they done anything wrong?"

Kuo answered with a shake of the head:

"They're honest folk. They've done nothing wrong. Only they don't seem keen to move forward. They're related to Han Number Six. Han looked down upon old Mrs. Wang, and she looks down upon other poor people."

Old Sun chimed in:

"A poor woman with the heart of a rich man."

Hsiao asked them:

"Are there people like that in other villages?"

Several voices answered together:

"Oh, yes."

"Plenty of them."

"Not too many, but not too few either."

Hsiao thought for a while, then stood up and declared:

"We'll end this meeting now. Go back to your villages and take care to correct that wrong tendency to attack middle peasants. Try to get those who are backward to take a part in things. Push the number of those who take part in the movement up to ninety-two per cent of the rural population. Apart from the big landlords, who refuse to surrender and whose old outlook is unchanged, all the villagers should be rallied round the Peasants' Association. Mobilizing the backward elements to join in activities and in production is an important part of your work. I shall go back to Yuanmao to see what can be done."

Old Sun chimed in, narrowing his left eye into a mirthful slit:

"Good! We welcome you back to our village. Our Peasants' Association is roomy and warm—not like this hole of a house. And if you take my sledge, before you've smoked two pipes you'll have arrived!"

Old Chu cut him short:

"Stop blethering, Old Sun. Team Leader Hsiao, do we accept loafers?"

Hsiao answered:

"Yes, we want them, too. They can be reformed by degrees."

The meeting broke up. Hsiao got onto Old Sun's sledge with his baggage-roll, and they drove to Yuanmao. He put up at the Peasants' Association and conferred with Kuo throughout the night as to how to mobilize the laggards. They made a list of laggards; but how to tackle them? Lying on the *kang*, still wrestling with this problem, Hsiao could not sleep. He trimmed the lamp and read the previous day's issue of *The Northeast China Daily*. There he came upon a report from Lalin County, describing how they had mobilized the laggards there. Hsiao woke Kuo up and went over the news with him, on the basis of which they devised some methods suited to local conditions. They decided to get to work first thing the next morning.

XVI

THE rays of the sun were glittering high on the windows. Sparrows were chirping and hopping from twig to twig on the trees outside. Hsiao got up, put on his clothes, washed his face and sat down to discuss with Kuo some details of the two meetings to be called. One meeting was to include old men and old women and was to take place in one of the rooms of the Peasants' Association; the other meeting was to include loafers of all sorts and was to take place in the east penthouse of the Peasants' Association. Old Sun and Old Tien were to act as ushers for the old people; Kuo and Chang Ching-shui were to be ushers for the loafers. All other meetings were called off. Other officers of the Peasants' Association were to sort out the landlords' confiscated property, classify the villagers, evaluate the articles to be distributed and fix price tags on them.

After the midday meal, people began to arrive. Some of the old folk could not walk so far, and the Peasants' Association sent sledges for them.

All the loafers of the village were assembled in the east penthouse. They knew each other at a glance and they laughed. Living in the same village, everybody knew what everybody else had done. On the table were a pile of sunflower seeds, a basketful of tobacco

and a wad of paper for rolling cigarettes. Some of the men cracked the seeds, some rolled cigarettes. One of them, a man known as Donkey Li, stood up and asked, inclining his neck to one side:

"Chairman Kuo, you asked us to this place. What's on?"

Kuo replied:

"We asked you to meet here in the first month of the new year for a friendly chat. You may have something to say about the Peasants' Association. All suggestions are welcome."

Donkey Li made a face and grunted:

"I've nothing to say. Everything is all right."

Some of the loafers were winking at each other, some were sprawling across the *kang*, some were blowing out rings of blue smoke. Donkey Li leaned back against the wall, his mouth shut and his eyes closed, in blissful repose. In an attempt to make them talk, Kuo asked:

"The other day, we held an all-village conference. You didn't come, did you?" All were silent. Donkey Li opened his eyes, twisted his mouth into a smile and answered:

"We've the wrong social status. Whatever we say is wrong."

Chang Ching-shui threw back to him:

"What's your status?"

Donkey Li answered with a laugh:

"I'm a big landlord."

Kuo said:

"Other people try to lower their status. Landlords call themselves rich peasants; rich peasants call themselves middle peasants, and so on. But you promote yourself. What's the big idea?"

Donkey Li himself could not help laughing. He said:

"In the past, poor men suffered, so I was a poor man. Now, landlords suffer, so I'm a landlord. Anyway, I'm not up to the rest of you, and I ought to steel myself in the struggle before I attend any meetings. May I go now?" When Kuo asked him to stay, he began gesticulating and spinning yarns just to make the others laugh. Team Leader Hsiao stepped into the room when Donkey Li was raving away. Hsiao asked Kuo in an undertone:

"Who's this man?"

Kuo answered:

"Donkey Li."

"What a name!"

"That's his nickname. His real name is Li Fa. In 1938, he left his home on the other side of the Great Wall. He set out with two donkeys. His wife and five-year-old son sat on one donkey, and the other donkey was loaded with a baggage-roll, pots and pans, ladles and sieves. After they arrived at this village, they rented fifty *mou* of land from Goodman Tu. Donkeys are rare here, and the villagers were so surprised to see one man with two donkeys that they called him Donkey Li. During the first two years he worked on the land, he ran into debt. His donkeys were sold to pay the debts and only his nickname remained. His little boy died of typhoid, and his wife ran away with another man. He became lazy, and stopped tilling the land. He wouldn't work, just loafed. And he took to visiting prostitutes, drinking, gambling and acting as a medium for the gods. When the Peasants' Association was formed, the villagers didn't ask him to join, nor did he want to."

Hsiao said:

"Ask him to see me one of these days."

Hsiao took his place in the centre of the room. All fell silent, even Donkey Li stopped gesticulating. Hsiao said:

"We've asked you here at New Year so that we can get to know each other. We all live off the land. We all have one and the same name—our name is *Poor*, not *Rich*. Is there anybody named *Rich* among you? If anybody did anything wrong in the past, it was because he was driven to it in the bad old society. He's not to blame."

Leaning against the wall at one end of the *kang*, a gambler nodded his head:

"That's right. In the past, this village was badly managed by the landlords. On rainy days, they gambled and asked us poor men to join them. We couldn't refuse; if we offended them, we might lose our rice bowls."

Hsiao resumed:

"For example . . . Li . . ." He had nearly called the man by his nickname, Donkey. After hesitating for a second, he went on: "Li Fa . . ." Donkey Li was surprised to hear his own name. For many years he had not been called by his real name, but had got used to the nickname. He was surprised and touched. Sur-

prised because the team leader knew his forgotten name, touched because this officer of the Eighth Route Army was treating him like a human being. Since his wife left him, he had lost his self-respect, formed bad habits and sunk lower and lower. He had never expected to be referred to by his own name again. He was all attention, while Hsiao went on:

"When Li Fa first came to this village, he was as good as any other peasant, wasn't he? But he rented land from a landlord, got into debt and had to sell his donkeys. His child died and he couldn't support a wife—she left him. Did he gamble when he first came?" Donkey Li bent his head and thought of his donkeys, his son, his wife, the first lonely and miserable night without his wife. He recalled how one year, when hunger had made him desperate, he had picked a corn-cob in the landlord's field. He was caught red-handed, and beaten till he dripped with blood and fainted. But a man has to live. Later he joined a group of loafers, and organized gambling parties and became a diviner. People despised him; he did not care, for he despised himself. Now, Team Leader Hsiao had called him by his name, showing that he did not despise him. Li was at a loss as to what to do. Hsiao was still speaking, in kindly tones:

"All the wrong we did in the past was forced on us by the landlords—none of us was to blame. Now, those bad elements are gone. If we don't push ahead and do better, we shall have only ourselves to blame. Times have changed, and we must change too. Now that we have land of our own, we must work better, live better and become better men. You talk it over yourselves. I've got to go to the other meeting."

Hsiao left the loafers to join the old folk. He sat outside the room where they were meeting, so that nobody noticed his presence. Old Sun was making a speech:

"When we pass from the old society to the new, each of us shows what stuff he's made of—like the Eight Fairies¹ when they crossed the sea. Don't say that you're too old. At eighty, Tai Kung² met Emperor Wen and took up an important post. How

¹ The eight immortals of Taoism in Chinese folk-lore.

² A hermit of the Chou Dynasty in the eleventh century B.C. who remained unknown until Emperor Wen chanced upon him and made him his prime minister. Legend has it that he practised the black art and was well versed in astrology and strategy.

can we call ourselves old at fifty? Elderly people are experienced and can give good advice. To tell you the truth, sometimes even Team Leader Hsiao asks my opinion. Only yesterday, at the meeting at Sanchia, I said that once we had horses the next thing to get was carts, while Old Chu insisted that grindstones were more important. Who was right, after all? Team Leader Hsiao agreed with me. What is Old Chu anyway? In my lifetime, I've crossed more bridges than he has streets. . . ."

Old Tien interrupted this digression to say:

"Without the Chinese Communist Party, we could never have seen this day. We owe everything to Chairman Mao. Is there anyone here who isn't better off thanks to the Communist Party?"

An old lady with silvery hair, taking her stemmed pipe from her mouth, made haste to express herself:

"Everybody is grateful to Chairman Mao. In the past, the pot was always empty. Now, we poor folk can live decently again. Things are a hundred times better than before. We must do all we can."

An old man demanded:

"Why not do all you can before you tell others to do so? Last year, your second son wanted to join the army, but you tried to stop him, didn't you?"

The white-haired old lady said:

"That's a lie. I never held him back; I only told him not to worry about me, to be a good soldier, to show no mercy to landlords and local despots. I said that because landlords and local despots hated us, we must guard against them and work hard."

The old man said with a smile:

"It sounds good, the way you put it."

Afraid that the old man was embarrassing the old woman too much, Hsiao stepped in and interrupted them:

"I'd like to say a word or two, folks. We've asked you here today for your advice. Now that the landlords are finished, we're our own masters. There is a lot of work for everybody. There is work for old people, too. Suppose we set up an old people's league to unite all old folk to follow the Peasants' Association and the Communist Party? If any one lags behind or fails to come to meetings, the others can criticize him. Do you agree?"

The old people shouted: "Yes!" They stopped cracking melon

seeds and began to talk about the proposed league. Remembering old Mrs. Wang, Hsiao asked Old Sun:

"Is old Mrs. Wang here?"

The carter scanned the audience and answered:

"No, she's not here. She's an old elm stump, immovable."

After the meeting, Hsiao asked Kuo to take him to call on old Mrs. Wang. They found her sitting on the *kang* cross-legged, in the east wing of the Wang house, mending rags. She was in a patched, blue cotton-padded long gown, and was wearing spectacles. Seeing them, she said icily:

"Please sit on the *kang*."

She did not get up to welcome them, but went on with her work. Hsiao and Kuo sat down on the *kang* edge. While Kuo was making conversation with the old lady, Hsiao was glancing at the *kang*. The mat was full of holes, the low-legged table was short of one leg, and the two flower-patterned cotton-padded quilts were thin, tattered, soiled and many years old. Curled up at the other end of the *kang* was a man about thirty years old, with tooth-brush eyebrows. This must be her unmarried son. He was pretending to be asleep. The north *kang* was a contrast, with a new mat and a flower-patterned, lacquered glass-case standing on the side, filled with new cotton-padded quilts and two pillows. As he was filling his pipe, Kuo asked the old lady:

"Where is your daughter-in-law?"

The old lady answered, without lifting her eyes:

"Who knows?"

At this moment, a young woman of about twenty stepped into the room. She was wearing a newish, blue cotton-padded gown and silver ear-rings which showed to advantage against her black hair. She did not greet the guests, but pursed her lips. Old Mrs. Wang scowled at her and growled:

"You go gallivanting, leaving the pigs to go hungry."

While withdrawing into the outer room, the young woman muttered:

"You were at home, weren't you?"

At this rebuff, old Mrs. Wang laid down her sewing. Blue veins swelled on her forehead, as she got off the *kang* and grunted furiously:

"How the world has changed that you dare to interfere with me!"

The new daughter-in-law was taking off her long gown to cook mash for the pigs, but she could not help answering:

"Yes, the world has changed!"

Old Mrs. Wang's lips trembled with indignation:

"Team Leader Hsiao, did you hear that?"

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law started scrapping. The son, who had been sprawling on the *kang*, sat up and said to his mother:

"Oh, mother, what is it now? Can't you leave her alone?"

Hsiao and Kuo also put in a word or two for the sake of peace. They then retreated into the courtyard, where they met an old man Lu, father of an armyman, who smilingly invited them to his room in the west wing. Old Lu, puffing at his pipe, told them everything about old Mrs. Wang:

Mrs. Wang's second son was a shoe-maker; he had saved some money and married a rich peasant's daughter. But Mrs. Wang's eldest son remained unmarried, and this worried the old woman very much. Her eldest son was an honest and hard working peasant, but he was a stammerer and had no savings. Many times had his mother tried to find him a wife, but failed. Then, it happened that during the land reform Old Li, a rich peasant, who was afraid of being attacked and wanted to find a poor peasant for his son-in-law, offered his daughter to Mrs. Wang's son. Betrothal gifts were exchanged. But then the tendency of going to extremes was halted. Rich peasants realized that they would not be dealt with like landlords, and Old Li began to regret the match he had arranged for his daughter. When, one day, the Wang family sent over a woollen quilt the Li family refused it and demanded a cloth quilt instead. As a woollen quilt was decidedly better than a cotton-padded cloth one, it was obvious that the Li family wanted to back out of their agreement. That was why Hsiao and Kuo had found old Mrs. Wang so cold and absent-minded, and why she kept quarrelling with her daughter-in-law.

As Hsiao and Kuo walked back to the Peasants' Association, they discussed the case of old Mrs. Wang. They agreed to send her a cloth quilt, after fixing a price on it and putting it on record. This quilt was to be deducted later from Mrs. Wang's share when the confiscated property was distributed among the poor families.

When a militiaman presented old Mrs. Wang with the quilt, she was so pleased that she could not stop smiling. After that,

she told everybody: "The Peasants' Association really cares for us. This new order is better than the old."

When Mrs. Wang had sent the cloth quilt to the Li family by a go-between, she immediately set out to call on Team Leader Hsiao at the Peasants' Association. Hsiao was chatting with Donkey Li, and the latter's hoarse voice could be heard:

"I can make a mat for the *kang*, but I can't make a leader for a group of loafers. That would be the death of me."

Hsiao tried to persuade him:

"You can lead a small group all right. Why not?"

Donkey Li answered:

"My status is bad, my reputation is worse."

Hsiao said with a grin:

"That doesn't matter. In future, if you do well, your status will improve, and so will your reputation. What do you think?" Hsiao asked this because Li looked as if he had something to say. Donkey Li looked around, then said in an undertone:

"I've a confession to make: I've five bags belonging to Snatcher Tang that I've been keeping for him. When he left them with me, he said: 'You're so poor, they won't suspect you of having anything. You help me now, and I'll help you in future.' Yesterday, everything you said, Team Leader Hsiao, touched me to the quick. I thought, I'm a poor man too and I ought to confess; otherwise how could I look you in the face? Wouldn't I be letting down the Communist Party?"

Hsiao patted him on the shoulder, saying:

"It's good that you made the confession. It proves that you identify yourself with the Peasants' Association."

Kuo put in, smiling:

"You're a peasant. How is it that you helped the landlord?"

Donkey Li answered with a grin:

"If I hadn't helped him, there wouldn't have been anything left for you to do!"

Hsiao broke into a laugh, and said:

"Right! You're right. Bring the bags over some time. And make haste to organize a small production group. We'll be seeing you soon." As soon as Donkey Li had left, Hsiao turned to ask Mrs. Wang: "What can I do for you, Mrs. Wang? Is the Li family giving you trouble again?"

Old Mrs. Wang shook her head. She tugged at Hsiao's sleeve, dragging him out of the room. In the outer room, she pulled herself up on tiptoe, put her mouth to his ear and began whispering. After a while, she raised her voice a little: "He's a distant relative of ours. In the past, I was muddle-headed and was afraid to speak. He's been hiding there ever since last year. . . ."

Hsiao looked out of the window and, fearing that they might be overheard, broke her off:

"All right."

After old Mrs. Wang had hobbled off, Hsiao returned to the inner room and told Kuo what the old lady had told him. Then, Hsiao enjoined Kuo in whispers:

"Some of the villagers here are involved in this case. He must be arrested. Two experienced men must go. You'd better be one of them. You'll need somebody to assist you. Chang Ching-shui can't be spared. If he went, who could take over security work in this village? Old Chu is sometimes thoughtless, and he isn't a good shot. Who do you think would be best?"

Kuo thought awhile and suggested:

"Pai Yu-shan is on leave. Why not take him along? He knows about this kind of job."

Hsiao nodded and said:

"If Pai can go, so much the better. But he came home to spend the New Year holiday with his wife. See whether he is willing to go. Fetch him here, and we'll discuss the matter together. We mustn't delay; the thing might leak out."

At dusk, Hsiao, Kuo and Pai had agreed upon the matter. Kuo and Pai packed up, obtained a road permit and a letter of recommendation, and were given some money for travelling. Hsiao gave them another letter to enable them to contact the public security bureau in the county seat. "The best thing would be for them to send men with you," he said.

The two peasants slung over their shoulders two 99 mm. rifles, got upon a sledge and set off to the county seat, from where they were to take a train to Yushu County in Kirin Province to make an arrest.

XVII

AFTER Kuo and Pai had left on their errand, the villagers prepared to distribute the confiscated land and other property. Benefiting by the experience of other counties and districts, the Peasants' Association of Yuanmao adopted the method of "comparative grading." By grading the villagers according to merit, they could distribute the land and confiscated property fairly and avoid unpleasantness.

Meetings went on day and night. On the third night of the "comparative grading," a large number of peasants turned up. Some were there to get themselves graded; some to support or criticize their neighbours; some just to share in the fun. Old Mrs. Wang and Donkey Li were among those present.

In the west wing of the Peasants' Association, two fires of pine logs had been lit. As the flames leaped up, a spicy aroma of turpentine filled the room. Men and women sat huddled together on the south and north *kang*, and the whole wing was filled to overflowing. Late comers had to stand. The two bean-oil lamps hanging from the beam kept swinging over the flames and smoke of the open fires. People were smoking and cracking sunflower seeds. The women were laughing. Old Sun was rattling on as usual. The light and smoke gave a festive air to the place. It looked different from those "gold-digging" gatherings of the past.

Those waiting to be graded stepped forth one after another and lined up, each ready to give his name, history and social status. Team Leader Hsiao was seated on a bench by the door, looking at the wall of backs before him. He could not see the peasants' faces, but he could hear their voices:

"I'm Chu Fu-lin. In my family, we've been hired hands for three generations. Who can beat that?"

At the square table against the wall on the west side of the room were sitting the members of the presidium. After Old Chu's report, one of the chairmen asked the villagers:

"Is Old Chu qualified for first place? Give your opinions, everybody."

A young man spoke from the south *kang*:

"Old Chu has made an honest living by tilling the land and by fishing in autumn. Last year, he caught a 'dog-fish'!" At this, the

room rippled with merriment. The villagers knew that by "dog-fish" the landlord Han Number Six was meant. The young man went on: "With that to his credit, I think Old Chu should be Number One."

An old man on the north *kang* supported the motion, twitching his white beard:

"I knew his father; he was a good peasant—worked all his life on the land."

The chairman asked:

"Has he no shortcomings?"

Several voices answered:

"No! No shortcomings."

Hardly had this response died out when a middle-aged man sitting in the shadow behind the others on the north *kang* broke in:

"I think he has one fault."

Many shouted:

"Come out and speak up. We can't hear you."

But the man was too nervous to step forward. He said:

"Let it go. I've nothing much to say. It isn't a serious fault."

The chairman said:

"Out with it. You can stay where you are."

The man muttered:

"When he was a boy, Old Chu was a swineherd. He used to steal corn-cobs."

Old Chu turned red. He stood up and replied:

"That's true. I did. Early in the morning every day, I used to take the pigs out before I'd had anything to eat. Once or twice, I picked a corn-cob. I was a kid then, and I didn't know that it was wrong."

A greybeard on the north *kang*, sucking a stemmed pipe, put in:

"That can't be called a fault. The landlord exploited you all the year round, year after year, and you didn't hurt him by picking a cob or two. Any little swineherd or cowherd of eight or nine, who went hungry all the time, seeing ripe maize on the roadside would have helped himself to it, naturally."

A militiaman, a youngster, spoke up, standing in the corner:

"Yes, I did the same thing, and I don't think it such a crime. Even if he'd taken more from the landlord, I'd think him quite right—we had to get our own back somehow. Of course, we mustn't

touch anything belonging to other poor men or to our democratic government. But, I remember, Old Chu did once do something that was really wrong. One year, you served Snatcher Tang as a sort of foreman. One day, after we had mowed one ridge, we sat down to have a smoke—that was allowed, of course. But, the moment you saw the landlord coming, with a stick in his hand, you shouted: 'Stop smoking and get back to work now. The sun is setting, and we have another half ridge to mow.' At the sight of the landlord, you acted like a slave-driver. Why? Were you currying favour? We must count that as a fault."

The chairman asked Old Chu:

"Is that true?"

Old Chu flushed to the tips of his ears, sweat oozing through every pore of his forehead. He stepped into the middle of the room, unbuttoned his coat and confessed sincerely:

"I don't remember, but I think I could have done it. I was a fool with a muddled head. Things are different now. We have the Communist Party to teach us."

A discussion started. Some said: "That wasn't a fault. In the old society, who could afford to annoy the landlord?"

Some said: "But you didn't have to suck up to the landlord."

Some said: "That wasn't sucking-up."

Some said: "You must know for whom you're working. When you worked for a landlord, you slacked a bit, and rightly. But, when you till your own land or work for the Eighth Route Army Government, you shouldn't dawdle in the least. There are two ways of looking at a thing."

The villagers sitting in front of Team Leader Hsiao were exchanging opinions too; but Hsiao could only see their backs—he could not tell who they were.

"At this line-up, people who have done wrong are going to be sorry—too late."

"This is a good method our democratic government has thought up. This collective raking into the past beats anything a good judge could do."

"The people can see better than the 'one-thousand-eyed Buddha.' Good or bad can't escape their notice. If you can't see, he sees; if he can't see, another fellow sees."

"The people's eyes can see a needle in a bottle of hay."

"This is like a palace examination."

"This is no joke. It's an important business affecting all of us, and our children and children's children."

Old Chu was still standing there, unchallenged, when Mrs. Chao, who had been in the outer room with some other women, walked slowly in. Before she had said anything someone murmured:

"Here's Chao Yu-lin's wife. She ought to be Number One."

Mrs. Chao reminded the villagers of her husband, who had died fighting against the bandits. She had made up her mind not to remarry, but to bring up her little boy So-chu. Honest and kind-hearted, she had been a mother to the orphaned little swineherd, Wu Chia-fu, too. Mrs. Pai, sitting on the south *kang*, was the first to recommend Mrs. Chao:

"She's one in a hundred. She deserves to take first place."

The motion was seconded unanimously, and the chairman accordingly placed Mrs. Chao first and Old Chu second. As the latter withdrew silently to sit down on the edge of the *kang*, Old Sun jumped off the *kang* to take his stand in the middle of the room, shaking the husks of seeds off the lap of his blue gown. Before he had opened his mouth, Old Chu said to him with a smile:

"So you want to see how you rate, too!"

They all laughed, and someone joked:

"Our carter is ready with his tiger-and-bear story."

"Last year, he hadn't the courage to take a horse. Now he is here for the third place!"

"All carters, boatmen, inn-keepers, porters and brokers should be shot. Yet here he pits himself against us."

Ignoring these witticisms and narrowing his left eye into a merry slit, Old Sun said evenly:

"There's one man we mustn't forget—Kuo Chuan-hai. He was Vice-Chairman of the Peasants' Association, then became leader of the Poor Peasants' and Farm Labourers' League, and is now Chairman of the Peasants' Association again. He's gone off on a job. Shouldn't he be above you, Old Chu?"

Old Chu said with resignation:

"Of course, Kuo's our leader. He's the only man I'll yield to."

Several voices approved simultaneously:

"We agree to Kuo being Number Two and Old Chu being Number Three."

A boy jumped down from the north *kang* in the inner room. Fourteen years old, he was so undergrown that he looked only eight or nine. This was the little swineherd. He recommended himself with a grin:

"My name is Wu Chia-fu. For three generations the Wu family have been poor peasants. At eight, I began to tend pigs for Han Number Six. At thirteen, I was whipped within an inch of my life by him. I'm still covered with the scars. If you like to have a look. . . ." He was beginning to unbutton his coat, when they said:

"No need to look. We all know about it."

Recalling the little swineherd's bleeding back and the cruelty of Han Number Six, they all felt for the boy.

"Third place for him," one man called out.

"That's right," said someone else.

"Everybody likes that little sparrow," a third commented.

The villagers began to confer noisily when the chairman called them to order, knocking the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe against the edge of the table:

"Quiet, please! We make the little swineherd Number Three and Old Chu Number Four. Is that all right?"

Before he had finished, Mrs. Pai got off the south *kang* and, turning to the women, said:

"Sisters and aunts!"

A man removed the pipe from his mouth to cut her short with a smile:

"Hey! She's addressing herself only to the women. We men aren't going to stand for that."

Another man countered:

"Why should we men be so narrow-minded?"

A third man shouted:

"Shut up, and let her speak."

Mrs. Pai went on:

"My husband has studied in the Party school in Hulan, and works at Shuangcheng. Coming back for New Year, he's gone off again on an errand. In the Manchukuo days, he was a drone, who wouldn't do a stroke of work. But, since the land reform workers came to our village, he has become a new man. He's no longer lazy."

A man's voice broke in:

"A melon-seller blowing her own trumpet!"

Mrs. Pai immediately arched her black eyebrows:

"How can you call this blowing my own trumpet? Get along with you!"

That man parried jokingly:

"I meant your old man—not you."

The chairman waved his hand, and said:

"Don't interrupt her. Hear her out."

"My husband was a militiaman; now he's a policeman," Mrs. Pai continued. "He is so busy, he has no time even for his family."

The chairman said:

"Pai is doing very well, everybody agrees. And what do you all think of Mrs. Pai?"

The women responded at the same time:

"She is very good too."

"She's an able woman."

"She is good both at farming and needlework."

A man cried out: "She's got a sharp tongue, but her heart is in the right place."

Another man suggested:

"Mrs. Pai is a poor peasant. We should take care of farmhands first."

The members of the presidium laid their heads together, and presently announced:

"Poor peasants and farmhands are on an equal footing. There's no need to give priority to one group or the other. Any one who steps forward will receive a 'comparative grading' according to his work and his attitude to the revolution. If you agree, we propose to give fourth place to Mrs. Pai. Any objections? All right, that's settled then. Mrs. Pai is Number Four, and Old Chu will move down again one place to Number Five."

A man standing beside Old Chu said with a chuckle:

"Old Chu suffers by every comparison! Where will he end up?"

Old Tien stood up and said:

"There's another man we shouldn't forget. He serves as a stretcher-bearer at the front. At this moment he may be climbing up a snow-covered mountain, sleeping on the ice or carrying the wounded. We ought to grade him too. I mean Li Chang-yu, better known as Big Li. Who hasn't heard of our blacksmith? Last

year, when we tackled Han Number Six, he forged spears for the militia day and night. His character is as good as his status."

Immediately several men and women responded in unison:

"Let's give fifth place to Big Li."

"We suggest Old Chu move down to sixth place."

A middle-aged man sitting beside Team Leader Hsiao rested his long-stemmed pipe vertically on the ground as he said:

"I say, Old Tien should be Number Six. In the Manchukuo days his daughter died under the landlord Han's whip rather than confess that her fiancé was a revolutionary. She had the backbone of a poor peasant and served the cause of the revolution. Shouldn't we support her father?"

The villagers clapped their hands in approval. Old Chu became Number Seven. Then it was Old Sun's turn. All agreed with Hsiao that: "Our carter has done something in the public cause, even if his contribution is not outstanding." Old Sun was made Number Eight.

In the bright lamplight, smoke was curling up to the beams and the aroma of turpentine filled the room. All the peasants looked cheerful—all but one strapping fellow on the same bench as Team Leader Hsiao. He did not laugh, did not even speak.

Hsiao exchanged a few remarks with him, and discovered that he was Hou Chang-shou, better known as Long-legs Hou. Powerfully built, he could do twice as much work as other men. Because of this, landlords had always liked to hire him in the past. He had been a labourer for twenty-six years. He was now forty-six. His status was good, but somehow he was a forgotten man, and he did not step forward himself to be graded either. Hsiao asked him:

"Why don't you see how you rate?"

No answer from that long fellow! This was a puzzle, which was only explained to Hsiao on the fourth night of the "comparative grading."

XVIII

THE fourth night of the "comparative grading" was devoted to discussing three unusual cases: Donkey Li, old Mrs. Wang and Long-legs Hou. All three of them were poor, but each had a question mark against his name. Though the cases of Donkey Li

and old Mrs. Wang were hotly debated, no agreement was reached. Team Leader Hsiao agreed that their grading should be postponed for further discussion later. There was a heated discussion, too, over Long-legs Hou.

Nothing was wrong with the social status or personal history of Long-legs Hou. But somebody brought up the fact that he had married Li Lan-ying, a niece of the landlord Snatcher Tang. Different villagers took very different views of this. The way the peasants tackled the landlord Goodman Tu had struck terror into the hearts of other landlords, who tried to seek protection one way or another. Snatcher Tang's niece had been a widow for some time. One night, this widow slunk into Long-legs Hou's room, bringing with her a cotton-padded quilt. She was only thirty while Hou was forty-six. She was sure she could easily accomplish her purpose, little expecting that she would only narrowly escape a beating. Hou hated all landlords and he hated Snatcher Tang particularly. He could never forget the hard looks he had had from the men in the Tang house, and the contemptuous airs of the women. One year, he had eye trouble and spent all his wages on its treatment. Consequently, on New Year's Eve he had no money to buy rice. He asked a loan of rice from the landlord, but Snatcher Tang, rolling his eyes fiercely, growled: "How can my rice be taken out?" And a woman's angry voice cried out from the room: "Throw him out!" Hou would never forget all this.

Now Snatcher Tang was down, but here came his widowed niece! Hou's first impulse was to beat her, and he raised his fist. But the pitiable way in which she was leaning against the door made him soften. He lowered his fist, and asked: "What do you want? You used to be too proud to look at us, now you come uninvited. Get out of here, or I'll beat you!" Rebuffed unexpectedly, the widow scurried off, forgetting her bedding-roll, a mirror, a comb, a handkerchief and some other knick-knacks. The presence of these things on the *kang* disturbed this forty-six-year-old bachelor so much that he could not sleep all night. At the crack of dawn, he got up and swore: "Little bitch! What do you mean by coming without being asked?"

The next night when he returned from the Peasants' Association, as soon as he lit the lamp his eye fell on the woman's quilt and trinkets. It flashed across his mind: "Her brother is a peasant, they say." Then he thought: "What has that to do with

you?" Still he reflected hopefully: "She'll have to come back to take her things away." She did not come, however.

The third night, on his way back from the Peasants' Association, he decided that she must have come during his absence and taken away her things—so much the better! But when he lighted his lamp, he saw not only the quilt but a woman lying beside it. Although not surprised, Hou stamped and swore:

"What do you want? You bitch!"

The widow sat up on the *kang*, cross-legged. She smiled and answered:

"I came for my quilt."

"Take it and go, then."

She said imploringly:

"Let me stay and cook for you. Wouldn't you like to sit down to a hot meal every day when you come back from the fields?"

Still Long-legs Hou scolded:

"Nonsense! Don't talk—go." But his voice was gentler now.

The woman persisted smiling:

"Not all the women of landlords' families are bad. There are good ones, too, who like poor men. My father is a peasant and my brother hires himself out as a farmhand. It was because my father couldn't pay back a debt he owed to Snatcher Tang that he sold me to him."

Hou retorted:

"Humbug! Everybody knows your people are small rich peasants. So your name is *Rich*."

The widow lilted:

"*Rich* is my name? If I stay here, *Poor* will be my name."

"Don't talk nonsense. It's getting dark. Go away."

His soft tone made Li Lan-ying answer with a smile:

"No, I won't. I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of wolves."

"The moon is so bright. What are you afraid of?"

Li Lan-ying put on an appealing look. Smiling, she declared with a tone of finality:

"Anyway, I'm not going. You can do what you like about it. If you won't let me sleep on the *kang*, I'll sleep on the ground. Will that suit you?"

Long-legs Hou said nothing. He was beginning to feel sorry for the woman. She would rather sleep on the ground than leave—but how could he let her lie on the cold, bare ground? Sympathy for her diluted his hatred for the landlord class. His heart melted. Stealing a glance at her worn padded gown and her smiling face, he remembered the proverb: “No decent man will fight a woman; no one will strike a smiling face.” With a sigh, he said gently:

“What can I do, the way you behave?”

“What can you do? That’s easy. The *kang* is large—you sleep on one end, and I’ll sleep on the other. The water in the well doesn’t mix with the water in the river. When the day dawns, I’ll go. What harm can I do you?”

The day dawned, but she did not go. She stayed put. When news of this spread through Yuanmao, all the villagers cursed him—even the middle peasants joined in. Some suggested that Long-legs Hou should be barred from the Peasants’ Association. Some compared him to Little Yang. Now, on the fourth night of the “comparative grading,” Hou’s case caused an uproar. Soon, the grading became an outright attack. With seven mouths and eight tongues, the villagers castigated and cursed him. Members of the presidium were powerless to stop them. Several voices cried out together:

“Long-legs Hou, what’s your name? *Poor* or *Rich*?”

Before Hou could answer, another shot at him:

“Is it that you’re a poor man developing a rich man’s heart?”

Giving him no time to deny this charge, someone else taunted him:

“You’ve surrendered to the landlord class!”

Hou had scarcely heard this accusation before a man on his right boomed:

“So you’re tired of being a poor man, eh!”

Chang Ching-shui went up to Hou and said:

“Can’t you tell the difference between friends and foes? Husband and wife are so close, you’re bound to tell her everything. After this, how can we still call you to meetings? With a landlord’s woman in your house, how can we still consider you one of us?”

Old Chu shouted hoarsely:

“You keep a she-wolf on the *kang*. Soon you’ll have a litter of wolf cubs!”

Old Sun pushed his way through the throng to shout at Hou:

"You had been a bachelor for years. How was it you suddenly couldn't wait any longer? Did she kidnap you?"

Hou was not afraid of Old Sun. He hastily protested:

"She came along herself. How can you say I was kidnapped?"

Old Sun smiled:

"She came along herself, didn't she? Does she have the same heart as you? When she gives you a son, what will his status be? A peasant or a landlord? And if he grows up and wants to fight a landlord, what if his mother forbids him?"

Chang Ching-shui put in:

"Don't you worry about that, Old Sun. There will be no more landlords when the child grows up."

Old Sun went on:

"If there are no landlords, there will still be American-Chiang reactionaries."

Old Chu answered:

"There won't be any American-Chiang reactionaries either by then."

Old Sun persisted, with an emphatic shake of his head:

"Anyway, it won't do. They'll never see eye to eye. One will want to eat sour things, the other hot things. One will think the *kang* too hot, the other will think it too cold. One will want to drive a cart, the other to row a boat. They will never be able to agree. If I were Long-legs Hou, I would die before I took her."

Chang Ching-shui said to Old Sun:

"Don't bluff, Old Sun. If you weren't married, you'd have taken her like a shot."

Old Chu advised Hou:

"Old Hou, if you still have any backbone, you throw that widow out. Otherwise, you may find yourself like a landlord."

Hou clasped both hands on his chest, as he replied:

"Brothers! Li Lan-ying came to my house herself. She lights the fire, cooks, chops straw, feeds pigs and can do half a man's job too. That's why I keep her."

Old Chu cut him short:

"Don't give us that line. Tell us—will you throw her out or not?"

Team Leader Hsiao stood up and said:

"Let him speak. What have you to say, Hou?"

Long-legs Hou said:

"I'm forty-six years old."

Old Sun chimed in:

"You're young enough to have waited. I'm fifty-one this year and I'll be fifty-two next year. But I'm a good carter, still going strong!"

Hsiao intervened:

"Don't interrupt, Old Sun. Let Hou finish."

Hou sighed and raised his head:

"I've been a farm labourer for twenty-six years. I worked till I nearly dropped. But I never got a wife. When my parents were living, they tried every year to find me a wife, but every year it came to nothing. I toiled year in and year out, but I never had enough to eat or to wear. No woman wanted to marry a poor fellow and put up with hardships. Talk of marriage began when I was twenty and has gone on for twenty-six years. But I was still a lone labourer. Only once during all that time did I come anywhere near getting a wife. The girl belonged to a Chang family. Her father, a poor peasant, said to the match-maker: 'Young Hou is not bad—he is tall and sturdy, able and kindly. He is hard working though poor, and he'll be able to support my daughter. Please ask his father to send us two lengths of cloth for her wedding clothes. Poor family to poor family, I ask nothing more.' My father was overjoyed and went out for the money. He approached Goodman Tu, but pleaded for help in vain. Tu answered with a polite smile: 'When a neighbour is preparing for a joyful event, I would like very much to help; but times have been hard, and I've had to spend a lot. I haven't the money for an inch of cloth, let alone two lengths.' My father said: 'You can easily spare me the money for two lengths of cloth. For you, it's like a hair on the back of a cow or a grain in a barn, and you would be helping to arrange the most important affair in my son's life.' Goodman Tu refused to listen. So the marriage fell through. And we couldn't blame the girl's father. He didn't want any money, he only asked for a jacket and trousers. After all, a bride couldn't very well appear in rags. Brothers and sisters! In the old society, for a poor man to find a wife was as hard as catching a wild goose in flight or a fish at the bottom of the river. Not even a poor girl would marry a poor man."

Hou stopped to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand. One of the women seemed to be weeping. It was Liu Kuei-lan. Remembering how her father had sold her to the Tu family as a child bride to clear a debt, she could not help shedding tears of sympathy and self-pity. Mrs. Chao, sitting beside her, was also dabbing her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. Hou went on:

"Don't cry, sisters. An old bachelor's hardships are too many to be told. When he gets holes in his clothes, he has no one to mend them. When the snow melts, he walks barefoot."

Another bachelor put in:

"When an unmarried poor peasant comes home from the field, he can hardly straighten up, he's so tired. But he has to cook. He often eats a frozen meal, sleeps on a frozen kang, and his heart feels frozen, too!"

Long-legs Hou resumed:

"I've made up my mind to die unmarried. But you mustn't blame me if there's no one, when I'm dead, to sweep the grave mounds of my father and mother, or to offer them sacrifices."

Chang Ching-shui chimed in:

"That's your feudalism working in you. The dead are dead. Whether or not you offer sacrifices, it makes no difference to them at all."

Hou continued:

"Today we peasants have stood up, and I've the money for a simple dowry. But look at my hair—it's grey at the temples!" He pulled off his dogskin cap to show his grey hair in the dim lamplight. Then, putting on his cap again, he went on:

"What kind of girl should I look for? Poor families are small—there aren't many girls. Even if a girl were willing to marry me, I couldn't let her. At my age, when a man goes to sleep, he may not get up the next morning. How could I have the heart to marry a young girl of fifteen or sixteen and make a widow of her?"

Old Sun said:

"You're thinking too far ahead."

Hou went on:

"In short, I didn't want a wife. That night, that woman came along and refused to go. She was ready to sleep on the earthen floor. What could I do? I thought of whipping her; but then I

remembered the proverb: 'No decent man will fight a woman; no one will strike a smiling face.'

He paused and hung his head. Nobody said anything. Presently Hou went on:

"Tonight, I've heard what you people had to say. I realize that, just when you're fighting landlords, I shouldn't have taken a landlord's woman. But the rice is cooked—what shall I do?"

Everybody remained silent—not even a cough was heard. Hou continued:

"Throw her out? She's ill. All day long, she lies on the *kang*, feeling sick. The old lady next door says she's probably pregnant. Tell me, what shall I do?"

Still the peasants said nothing. Hsiao held a short consultation with the members of the presidium, then stood up. Men and women surrounded him, wide-eyed, to hear what he had to say. Hsiao told Long-legs Hou:

"What's done is done. You needn't throw her out."

Most of the women felt relieved and smiled. The men made loud comments. Some said:

"All right."

Some said:

"This ought to suit her nicely—she becomes a poor peasant at a bound."

Chang Ching-shui said:

"We poor men are soft-hearted. Anyway, there is no need to fear that they may fight back."

Old Sun added, his left eye narrowed into a merry slit:

"Brothers of the Eighth Route Army have a reputation for leniency."

Hsiao supplemented:

"We treat all enemies who surrender leniently." Then he enjoined Long-legs Hou:

"But you must be careful. Don't let her know anything which she ought not to know."

Chang Ching-shui added:

"If you're sensible, don't let her into any secrets concerning the Peasants' Association."

Hou hastened to pledge himself, with a nod:

"Of course, I won't. If I did, how could I still call myself a man?"

Hsiao continued:

"You must always watch the way she is thinking, to see whether she is really for the poor or still for the landlords. Don't just judge her by what she says—see whether she is hard working and honest. Living together, you will know everything about each other. Labour changes man and the world. Tell her that after she's worked for five years people will stop treating her as a woman from a landlord's family. You can't be too careful. It's for you to lead her forward. Don't let her lead you astray."

The villagers approved the suggestion of Team Leader Hsiao and the presidium that Long-legs Hou might keep Li Lan-ying as his wife but must encourage her to remould her thought and do manual work. Long-legs Hou was graded Number One Hundred and Twenty and accordingly entitled to a share of land and movables. Li Lan-ying would also be given a piece of land, but nothing else.

After the meeting, Hou invited Hsiao to his house. Eager to see the new wife, the team leader accepted the invitation. As they approached Hou's home, Hsiao saw in the distance a woman in an old blue padded gown, her sleeves rolled up, feeding pigs. Motioning with his head in the woman's direction, Hou said:

"There she is."

Li Lan-ying looked up, saw Team Leader Hsiao and bent her head again to feed the pigs. Hsiao stepped with Hou into the room and saw on the *kang* a tattered cotton-padded jacket in the process of being mended. Everything was neat in the room. Two quilts were folded on the *kang*; a red paper pattern was pasted on the windowpane. Li Lan-ying entered the room for a match, nervously casting a sidelong glance at Hsiao. But the team leader's cordial smile reassured her. Seeing that she was going to kindle a fire, Hsiao said to her:

"Don't trouble to boil water. I must be going now." He rose to go, saying to Long-legs Hou:

"After the Lantern Festival it will be some time before you need to manure the fields. Take in some subsidiary work. What can she do?"

Li Lan-ying was listening outside but she said nothing. Hou answered for her:

"She can plait straw-hats. After the snow has melted, I'll go down to the riverside for some reeds."

Hou followed Hsiao out, chatting about everyday affairs and farming. Hsiao continued:

"If she's willing to work, she's all right. But you'll have to be on your guard. After the storm blows over, she may want to go back to an idle life and decide to leave you. Women from landlords' families aren't used to working."

Hou answered:

"She wouldn't dare! If she doesn't do what I say, I'll give her a hiding. If she still disobeys me, I'll throw her out."

Hsiao said, smiling:

"No, you mustn't beat her. She looks honest. Try to convince her of the right thing to do." Hsiao added with a smile: "Now that you have a wife and live better, don't turn out disloyal to our cause."

Hou answered swiftly:

"How could I? From the bottom of my heart I'm grateful to Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. But for the land reform, I could have gone on slaving until I died, but never have got half a ridge of land or half a room, let alone a wife. You can take my word for it, Team Leader Hsiao, I'll always stand by the revolution. I'm not like Hua Yung-hsi."

Reminded of Hua, Hsiao thought he had better go to see him. Leaving Hou, he headed for the Hua house.

XIX

THE sky was a murky grey, and it was unusually cold. It was not snowing; but the branches of poplars and willows were hung with icicles, beard-like, silvery, glittering.

Hsiao arrived at Hua Yung-hsi's house which was set in a little yard neatly fenced with willow shoots. As he flung open the wooden wicket, two white geese started flapping their wings with fright, while the gander, craning its neck and cackling, waddled slowly and majestically forward, as if ready to accept battle. The yard had been cleared of snow. The corner of the yard leading to a neighbour's home was piled high with dry fuel. In the open stable was tied a horse with brown flanks, fat and sleek, chewing its mash. There was a big sledge in the middle of the yard. Under the eaves of the north rooms, a sow and five porklings were eating

out of a trough, pushing and grunting. A cock with a moulting tail flew up on to a haystack, craned its neck and crowed, then flew down and led a small flock of cackling, clucking hens to crabble about in the snow by the haystack, in the mud and in the hay, for something to eat.

Stepping into the house, Hsiao found Hua's wife, formerly a widow, standing beside the stove. White steam was rising from a pot on the fire. She greeted Hsiao lukewarmly, mumbled a few words, and then turned to ladle water out of a vat. Hua came out from the inner room and asked Hsiao up on to the *kang*, where a wizened little boy of about ten—Mrs. Hua's son by her first husband—was combing bristles. Hua had even less to say now than in the old days. He just grinned at Hsiao in a silly manner and puffed away at his stemmed pipe. During the land distribution, Hua had played no part at all. While the others were attending meetings, he drove his sledge up the hills for fuel and logs. When he got back, he kept to his house. He was afraid if people called him to a meeting because that would involve him in another quarrel with his wife.

Once, he was leading his horse along the road when he ran into Chang Ching-shui, who asked him why he had made himself so scarce lately. Hua answered with a sigh:

"Ah! We had better take turns to keep the movement going. A few of us shouldn't try to monopolize the revolution."

With that, and with an apologetic smile, he was off, leading his brown-flanked horse.

On New Year's Eve, when the village officers were distributing pork and wheat among the peasants, they remembered that Hua had won a merit in the fighting against the bandits the previous year and decided to give him a share. But he declined it, saying: "I don't deserve any share. Even if I took the pork, I couldn't eat it with relish. And we've enough white flour of our own."

Mrs. Hua, however, urged him: "You deserve a share. Why don't you go and get it? What a fool!" And, taking up a basket, she went to the Peasants' Association for the pork and wheat herself.

Hua Yung-hsi had made no progress, but he was still better than his wife. He thought: "What's mine is mine; what's theirs is theirs." She thought: "What's mine is mine; what's theirs may be mine, too."

Hua was afraid of her and always did as she told him. She was his head, he was her tail. Kuo Chuan-hai remarked: "Old Hua is short-sighted. He's completely under his wife's thumb. He doesn't behave like a man."

Hua Yung-hsi's wife was different from Long-legs Hou's Li Lan-ying. Hou's wife was timid and submissive. She worked from morning till night, and hardly dared open her mouth. He was the master—the east wind had subdued the west wind. Hua's wife, on the other hand, was a shrew. When husband and wife bandied words, she always got the better of him. She kept him at home, even when there was nothing to do, and wouldn't let him mix with people. The two of them held themselves aloof from whatever might be happening in the outside world. Hua took care to do what his wife told him. The west wind subdued the east wind.

At first, Hua had made an attempt to defy her. In the movement against bad elements in the village, he had gone to meetings at the Peasants' Association every day, neglecting his household chores. One day, his wife could not find dry fuel for the kitchen stove, and had to use wet twigs, which smoked badly but would not burn. The moment her husband came home, she flared up:

"It's time you chose between your home and the Peasants' Association. If you decide for the Peasants' Association, you must ask them to provide for your family; otherwise we'll have to part. A woman expects her husband to provide her with clothes to wear and food to eat. But, instead of working, you spend all your time at meetings. Shall I find another man to support me?"

Taunted like this, Hua paid her back with a few hard words. Thereupon, the woman beat her breast and tore her hair, wailed and whined, and taking her son by the hand made for the gate. Hua pulled her back, apologized to her, condemned himself, and spoke until he was hoarse to prove his contrition. Finally, she pardoned him and consented to stay. But this incident had established her supremacy, and from now on Hua had to yield. At night, she was kind to him, fondled him and wheedled him:

"All men have to work. How can you neglect your home? I'm sure you don't want me to have to go begging, do you? Even Confucius was a family man."

Convinced of the correctness of her arguments, Hua made up

his mind to work at home and not to go to the Peasants' Association. Even when he knew that Chang Fu-ying was trying by a mean artifice to oust Kuo Chun-hai, he refrained from speaking up for the wronged party.

The activists frequently discussed the case of Hua Yung-hsi and his wife.

"For the sake of a cow and a calf, Hua has forgotten us and done himself a lot of harm."

"He doesn't do anything bad, but he doesn't make any progress."

"He sticks to his wife, and doesn't care if the sky falls outside."

Now, Hsiao refrained from reproaching him or jeering at him. The team leader had a frank talk with him, trying to make him understand where his duty lay and that he ought to play an active part in village affairs. Hsiao reminded him of his merit in the battle against the bandits and of his glorious past. Hua was greatly moved. He saw his wife standing by the door, glaring at him; but he did not care. After thinking for a little, he said to Hsiao:

"I'll call to see you later at the Peasants' Association."

Hsiao left. In his conversation with Hua, he had taken care not to mention the fact that Hua had applied to join the Party. For Hsiao acted on the principle: "Be strict with Party members, lenient with non-Party members." Hua was welcome to resume his work in the Peasants' Association, but to win a place in the Party he must prove himself worthy of reconsideration and be passed by a group of Party members.

XX

FROM Hua Yung-hsi's house Hsiao returned to the Peasants' Association. He sat down at the square table to write a note to the head of the organization department of the county Party committee:

... To see is to believe. I've been to see Hua Yung-hsi and have come to understand certain conditions. Wives try to hold back their husbands. This is a common problem. It's the same in Sanchia. . . .

At this moment, somebody blew into the room and stopped before him. It was Liu Kuei-lan. Closing his notebook, Hsiao greeted her, smiling:

"What are you so happy about? What's the good news?"

The girl's face was flushed, either with cold or with embarrassment. She hesitated for a long time before she broached:

"Could you do somebody a favour?"

Hsiao asked:

"What is it?"

Liu Kuei-lan gave her head a jerk, throwing back a lock of hair, then she said:

"A classmate of mine in the literacy class would like to know—well, she would like to get a divorce. Can it be done?"

She could not bring herself to say that it was herself in question. Blushing even more deeply and avoiding Hsiao's searching eyes, she sat down on the edge of the *kang*. In a worn blue padded gown and a pair of reed-plaited sandals, with nothing but a little black pin in her hair, she was simple and neat, a village girl. Hsiao saw through her, but before he had answered she urged smiling:

"Can it be done?"

Hsiao parried:

"It all depends. Who wants a divorce? Who's the other party?" He paused, then added jokingly: "Child-wives are not allowed a divorce."

Liu Kuei-lan jumped off the *kang* and exclaimed:

"What? Do you let child-wives down?"

Hsiao answered with a smile:

"A child-wife has been fed and brought up by her mother-in-law. What right has she to a divorce?"

Liu Kuei-lan retorted:

"Not for nothing has my mother-in-law fed me. I've slaved for the Tu family since I was eleven, in and out of the house, putting my hand to every task. The boy is only eleven. His father is a beast. His mother is like a hornets' nest; everybody is afraid of her. One day, somebody clipped a few strands of hair off the tail of her horse. She made a mountain out of a molehill and, posting herself in the middle of the yard, went on cursing the time it takes for a meal. After that, no one dared to set foot in her house. Do you think I can live there? And the way she treats her daughter-in-law—you've never seen anything like it."

Liu Kuei-lan recalled all she had had to put up with during the five years with her mother-in-law. She had not had a decent meal, had not had a decent piece of clothing. She remembered how her mother-in-law had hacked at her with a hoe, and was on the point of telling Team Leader Hsiao about it, but broke off, thinking that he must have heard about it already. Instead, pursing her lips, she said:

"While my mother was living, I went home once in a while to have a good cry. And mother would cry too, and say: 'Child, it's fate. You're destined to suffer. Better be patient.' For five years, I've put up with it. Now you tell me a child-wife can't get herself a divorce. What use is the revolution, if I've still to lead such a miserable life? The only way out for me is death. If all the girls like me die, nobody will care a straw." Tears coursed down her cheeks. Then, wiping her eyes, she flounced out of the room. Hsiao hurried after her, called her back and said:

"I was only joking, but you believed me! Under the democratic government, any man or woman can get a divorce, provided he or she has a good reason. Go and get the smallpox physician to make out a petition for you and send it to the district head. He will give you and your mother-in-law a fair hearing, and if you've reason on your side you'll get your divorce."

Liu Kuei-lan broke into a smile. Hsiao asked:

"Who's the man?"

"I won't tell you."

Hsiao said, feigning seriousness:

"If you don't tell me who he is, I don't see how I can help you."

Liu Kuei-lan answered hastily:

"If I tell you, you must promise not to let on."

"Of course, I won't tell anybody."

Liu Kuei-lan blushed, paused and stammered:

"We're a good pair. I can't read or write, and neither can he."

Hsiao answered with a chuckle:

"Old Sun, the carter, doesn't know a single character. Have you set your cap at him?"

As Liu Kuei-lan rose to go, Hsiao hastily said:

"Now seriously, what kind of man have you chosen? Is he a

good worker? What's his status? What is he like? If he's all right in all these respects, I'll find a match-maker for you. If not, the sooner you drop the matter, the better."

Liu Kuei-lan turned red again, to the tips of her ears, and answered with a sidelong glance:

"He's a peasant. He must be doing all right, otherwise the villagers wouldn't have supported him, would they? What is he like?" She paused, then said: "I don't know what other people would say, but he's good enough for me. We're satisfied with each other, and that's the main thing."

Hsiao teased her:

"'We' and 'each other'! Who's the man? Nobody has arranged a match for you yet, and you're already talking about 'we'!"

Her whole neck flushing now, Liu Kuei-lan fenced:

"Team Leader, what's the matter with you today? Have you been drinking?"

Hsiao was really in high spirits. He had done a good day's work, and he wanted to have a little fun. He went on teasingly:

"To tell you the truth, the man you're setting your cap at is already in love with somebody else." Taken aback, Liu Kuei-lan turned sharply upon Hsiao and asked:

"Who's she?"

"Who's *he*? Tell me first the name of your man, for I may be mistaken."

"Tell me first what girl he's after."

Hsiao said:

"Who knows who your 'he' is?"

At this moment, the telephone rang. Hsiao put the receiver to his ear. Liu Kuei-lan waited, anxious to get to the bottom of the matter. She heard Hsiao say:

"Who? Oh, you've had a telephone call from Kuo Chuan-hai?"

That particular name mentioned over the phone made Liu Kuei-lan's cheeks burn, and she moved closer to listen with great interest. Meanwhile, Hsiao was replying in a surprised tone:

"They're not allowed to put a man under arrest? From now on, no officer from the Peasants' Association can go to town to make an arrest? For fear they might bungle? What's that? I can hardly follow you—speak up, please. Your voice still isn't clear enough—give the phone a ring or two. Now, y—yes . . .

it's clear. Well, you send a message to the public security office, telling them that the man is wanted by us—he is a Kuomintang spy, and there is a case against him in this village. We must have him in order to settle the case. Besides, the people won't be satisfied unless he is arrested. All right, that's settled. Tell them to dispatch several men with Kuo, to make the arrest on their authority. Then, they can transfer the culprit to us for an examination. After we have established certain facts, we'll send him back to them to pass sentence. Is that all right? You ring up department head Chen and tell him that that's my idea. Just a minute—hold the line. . . ." Hsiao smiled, as he added: "When Kuo returns to the county, tell him to come home quick. There is good news for him. You ask what it is? Well, a red-letter event for him."

Hsiao hung up the receiver and turned to Liu Kuei-lan with a smile. The round-faced girl hastily repeated her question:

"Whom is he setting his cap at?"

Hsiao sat down at the square table and answered in a leisurely manner:

"He has lost his heart to a round-faced girl, the most famous unwedded child-wife in Yuanmao, named Liu Kuei-lan."

"Liu Kuei-lan! Liu Kuei-lan!" Mrs. Pai was calling from the courtyard at the top of her voice. This gave Liu Kuei-lan the excuse she wanted to dart off with the reddest of faces. Mrs. Pai grumbled: "Here you are! I've tramped up and down looking for you. Come on, quick, they're waiting for you at a meeting. What has been keeping you?"

Hsiao stuck his head out of the window and explained:

"She has been talking with me about an affair of her heart."

Mrs. Pai stepped into the room and said, smiling:

"I guess it's an affair between her and Kuo. Are you the match-maker?"

Hsiao answered, smiling:

"I can't arrogate Old Sun's job. What do you say to the match, Mrs. Pai?"

"It's a match between dragon and phoenix. Nothing better. When is the wedding? We'll celebrate it with drums and gongs. Meanwhile, we must hurry off to the meeting."

Mrs. Pai grabbed Liu Kuei-lan by the hand and hurried her

away. As they ran through the gate, several geese scattered in fright, flapping their wings and cackling. From the distance the wind carried sounds of happy, light-hearted laughter.

XXI

LET us leave Yuanmao Village for a moment to see how Kuo Chuan-hai and Pai Yu-shan have despatched their task.

In the movement to mobilize the village laggards, Team Leader Hsiao had learned from old Mrs. Wang that Han Number Five, elder brother of the landlord Han Number Six and Chiang Kai-shek's agent for the five counties east of Harbin, was in hiding in a mountain village in Yushu County. Hsiao had sent Kuo and Pai there to arrest him. When they arrived in the provincial capital, however, Kuo and Pai were told that peasants were no longer allowed to make arrests in other counties or towns. Because of the special nature of the case, the parties concerned had discussed it over the telephone and by letter, and finally the provincial authorities had given Kuo and Pai a letter of introduction to the Yushu county administration and detailed three public security officers to help them. Thus, considerable time had been lost, and Kuo had been worrying lest the criminal might have got wind of the matter and given them the slip. He worried, too, about Yuanmao. How was the "comparative grading" proceeding? Had any steps been taken to prevent bad characters setting fire to the confiscated property? In such an overstrained state of mind, he lost his appetite and sleep. Pai Yu-shan, however, took it easy—he did not worry, but slept well and ate heartily.

As soon as they received their letter of introduction, the two Yuanmao villagers set out immediately with the three public security officers without waiting for a sledge, although it was already evening. At midnight they reached their destination, a village at the foot of a mountain about ten miles from the county seat. Kuo sent Pai to contact the local Peasants' Association, while he and the three public security officers headed at once for the place where they had been informed Han Number Five was hiding. Knowing that Han was a good shot who could fire two pistols at the same time, Kuo told his men to prepare for battle,

to mount their bayonets and cock their guns. He felt in his pocket to make sure that he had a box of matches and some pine torches. Han's three-winged thatched house stood alone on a slope, facing south, with its back to a barren slope. Halfway up the hill was a thicket. In front of the house the ground was flat, and it was fifty or sixty paces to the next house. Anyone approaching could be seen far away. Now, the four men took cover behind a haystack to scan the Han house under the starlight, discussing in whispers the best way to approach it. Housetops, haystacks and millstones had a white cap of snow. There was not a soul in sight, and all was quiet. Kuo told one of the public security officers to go around the left corner and watch the back gate. He and the other two men were running towards the front gate, when, all of a sudden, dogs started yelping fiercely. Fearing that Han Number Five might wake, resist or escape, Kuo called anxiously in an undertone:

"Follow me, quick!"

Running ahead of the others, Kuo was the first to reach a firmly barred willow-plaited gate. The dogs were barking furiously, and they could hear people getting up in the north wing. Desperate, Kuo made a hole in the gate by piercing the plaited twigs with his bayonet and ramming it with the butt of his rifle. As they got through one after another into the courtyard, Kuo said to the others:

"You two stay outside while I break into the house. If he fires, he can only get me." He bounded to the door of the north wing and kicked it open. It was pitch dark inside after the dazzling snow-whiteness outside. In the inner room, there was a stir. Kuo flung the inside door open and levelled his gun at the south *kang*, where by the dim light of snow reflected on the windowpane he could see several people sitting up.

Rattling his gun, Kuo shouted at them:

"Don't move, any of you!"

Tucking the gun under his left arm, Kuo fumbled with his right hand for the matches and twigs in his pocket. But just as he was about to strike a match, he thought better of it. Courageous by nature and schooled by experience in last year's battle against the bandits, Kuo could fight and think at the same time. If he were to light a match, he would be making a target of himself for

Han Number Five—nothing easier than shooting from the dark at the light. But without a light, how could he find the man he wanted? With the tip of his bayonet, he touched a shadow on the *kang*, ordering loudly:

"Light the lamp, quick!"

A woman's voice answered:

"I've no matches."

Kuo threw her his matches. She struck a match and lighted a lamp at the end of the *kang*. Kuo saw two women, one old and one young, a little boy and a seven or eight-year-old girl, all leaning in a row against the window frame above the *kang*, their feet under a large quilt. They did not look in the least flurried, and not one of them cried, as if they had been expecting this for a long time. The little girl stared round-eyed at Kuo. There was not the ghost of Han Number Five on the south *kang*, and the north *kang* was piled high with corn-cobs. Kuo lifted the lid of a big trunk, but it was full of clothes and sundries. After looking in every corner and nook in vain, he called through the window:

"Han Number Five is not here!"

The three public security officers ran in, exclaiming simultaneously:

"Not here? Escaped?"

In the hustle, Kuo heard a curious sound from the roof and, looking up, saw a bare foot sticking through a hole in the ceiling. He cocked his gun and aimed it at the hole, shouting:

"Get out of there, and come down!"

Meanwhile, Pai Yu-shan and some twenty local militiamen had thrown a cordon around the house. Hearing somebody inside exclaim: "He's caught now!" Pai rushed into the room, in time to see a man letting himself down from a hole in the ceiling onto the trunk—a man with a large head, a bulging neck and two bald temples, a counterpart of Han Number Six. He was in white underwear, covered with dust, and was trembling with cold. This was Han Number Five. When his dogs started barking, he had waked and hidden above the ceiling. Having wormed his way into the Peasants' Association, where he served as a clerk, and with many friends in the village, Han had thought that he was pretty safe. So he put away his two pistols, and did not clear the snow from the moat which he had dug in front of his house. He had

expected to pass the winter in peace and then, when the spring came and the trees began to leaf, he would think up another plan. Now, before the trees had leafed, before he had had time to get into his clothes, they had come for him! While Kuo was levelling the gun at him, Pai untied his belt-rope and said to the gangster with a smile:

"We'll have to trouble you to come with us."

Pulling on his padded trousers, Han answered, also smiling:

"It's all right. Go ahead."

Kuo turned to the chairman of the local Peasants' Association—a man named Chang—and greeted him, saying:

"I'm sorry, I was afraid he might get away, so I didn't call on you first."

Chang hastily answered:

"That's all right." He looked rather ashamed to have a gangster discovered in his village—a man, moreover, who had served as a clerk in the Peasants' Association. It was a disgrace. As he accompanied the visitors out of the house, he said:

"We did find him suspicious in certain ways, and we weren't clear about his past. But we were too busy with other things to make an investigation. Now, you've done us a good turn. Won't you come to the Peasants' Association to warm yourselves, while I get you a sledge?"

Afraid of fresh trouble if they delayed, Kuo promptly answered:

"No, don't trouble. We must be off at once."

The chairman of the local Peasants' Association insisted on getting a sledge and set off with several militiamen to see to the matter. Kuo thought that such a notorious gangster as Han, who had lain low here for more than a year, must have followers nearby, and wondered if the small fry could be netted after their chief. He immediately urged Pai and two of the public security officers to walk Han off without further delay. He and the third officer took up the rear, looking back over their shoulders every now and then. Soon they heard the beat of horses' hooves and the crunching of a sledge approaching from a distance over the crisp snow. Kuo turned round, levelled his gun and shouted resoundingly:

"Who goes there? Halt!"

A voice from the sledge answered:

"We are from the Peasants' Association."

Kuo cried out:

"Whoever you are, stop. Send a man over."

The sledge drew to a stop about twenty paces from them, and a middle-aged man in an old sheepskin jacket ran over and said:

"Our chairman says you must be tired. He's sent a sledge for you."

In the dim starlight, Kuo looked this man up and down. Seeing no one else on the sledge, he felt reassured and called to Pai to wait. In another minute, they all got on the sledge and drove on, three horses pulling seven men over the slippery, frozen road towards the county town of Yushu. The carter soliloquized:

"No one knew where this fellow came from. He had no roots. He told us he was from Chiamusu and that his name was Li Po-shan. But, one day, his son got into a fight with some other kids and swore: 'We Hans never tell lies. If I tell half a lie, may the god of thunder strike me dead!' My boy asked: 'Is Han your name? Not Li?' The other quickly denied it, saying: 'My mother is named Han.' We were busy dealing with the landlords, so we didn't look into the matter. Now, we're all glad to see a hidden bandit caught and a source of trouble weeded out." The carter looked over his shoulder at Han Number Five, and asked with a chuckle:

"Now, what's your name? Li or Han?"

The eastern sky gradually paled and then reddened, as the sun rose. Cocks in the villages along the highway began to crow. The cold morning wind set the travellers shivering.

The sledge took them all the way to Yushu. There the three public security officers branched off to the provincial capital. Kuo and Pai got in touch with the authorities concerned and then took their prisoner straight on by the first train in the morning to their county.

They did not stop long at the county seat either, but, taking another sledge, made their way rapidly back to Yuanmao.

XXII

THE news that Kuo Chuan-hai and Pai Yu-shan had arrived at the West Gate on a sledge spread instantaneously all over the

village of Yuanmao. All the villagers poured out of their houses and gathered around Han Number Five, blocking the way. Chang Ching-shui of the Public Security Committee of the Peasants' Association cried out:

"Make way and let him pass. Later on, you'll have plenty of time to look at him."

The little swineherd Wu squeezed to the front, gazed at Han and exclaimed:

"He looks exactly like Han Number Six—bean-eyed, bald-templed."

Old Sun stepped after Wu and asked with a wink, feigning surprise:

"Aren't you Mr. Han the Fifth? When did Your Excellency arrive? Did Your Excellency come by your Japanese car or by your big Japanese horse?"

When Han Number Five looked up and saw this black mass of men, he turned deathly pale and his heart pounded. However, showing a brave front, he answered lightly with a smile:

"They didn't catch a sable; they've come back with a cat instead."

Han Number Five was imprisoned in an empty room in the Peasants' Association. Instead of dispersing at once, the villagers hung about in the courtyard, plying Kuo and Pai with questions about the circumstances leading to Han's arrest. When he heard how the Peasants' Association of the other village had sent the party back on a sledge, Old Sun exclaimed:

"That was good of them!"

Chang Ching-shui said:

"Of course. Another proof of the fact that all workers and peasants in the world are one family."

Kuo Chuan-hai added:

"A good example for us. We should help other villages too."

The spectators thinned out gradually. Chang Ching-shui and Wu agreed that militiamen should stand guard day and night outside the building where Han Number Five was being detained. Kuo and Pai went to the Peasants' Association, where they found Team Leader Hsiao consulting with several activists how best to distribute the horses concealed by local landlords and rich peasants and those recently purchased among the poor peasants. Hsiao

advised Kuo and Pai to take a rest. But Kuo stayed behind and, at the first opportunity, asked Hsiao in an undertone:

"County Party secretary Hsu told me that he had received a message from you saying: 'Tell Kuo to come back as soon as possible—there is good news for him.' What's the good news?"

Hsiao answered, smiling:

"The best of news for you. Go and get some sleep before I break it to you."

"If you don't tell me, how can I sleep?"

"If I tell you now, you won't want to sleep. You had better lie down somewhere and have a nap." Hsiao turned to Old Chu: "Old Chu, let's finish our business. You said we ought to provide for the have-nots first. That's a good idea. Let's first make out a list of have-nots."

Old Chu said:

"Take Wu for instance. He hasn't even got a quilt, so he's a have-not."

Kuo had not closed his eyes for two nights. He lay down on the *kang* and in another instant was asleep. Worry had made him lose weight. Lying there, without any covering, he started snoring softly. When Liu Kuei-lan came in and saw him, she was afraid that he might catch cold. While the others were laying their heads together at the table about the distribution of goods, she picked up a red quilt that was on the *kang* and gingerly spread it over him.

Pai Yu-shan's wife gave Pai a great welcome. She ladled a basinful of water so that he could wash his face. Sitting on the edge of the *kang* mending a shoe-sole, she was too full of the village news to ask him about his trip. First she told him: "Liu Kuei-lan wants to marry Kuo Chuan-hai. She has sent a petition to the district chairman, asking for a divorce from her *kang-wetter*."

Pai stripped off his padded coat and cloth jacket, exposing his brawny, copper-coloured chest, and began to douse himself while the water was warm. He laughed and asked:

"What do you mean—'*kang-wetter*'?"

"He's only eleven, and he wets the *kang* every night. He's a *kang-wetting* husband, isn't he?"

Pai asked:

"Has the district chairman given his permission?"

"Of course. She'll suit Chairman Kuo very well. They're both

activists. They'll make a handsome couple too. Liu Kuei-lan is quite satisfied with Kuo. It's up to him now to make up his mind about her. Do you think he likes her?"

Pai did not answer. He doused his chest, back, neck, arms, then put on his clothes. He fished out of his discoloured leather portfolio the tooth-brush and tooth-paste issued by the public security office. While cleaning his teeth, he asked:

"Who's the match-maker?"

"Team Leader Hsiao wants Old Sun for the job. Old Sun says that two match-makers are required for a first marriage."

Rinsing his tooth-brush in the mug, Pai asked:

"In Liu Kuei-lan's case, is it counted as a first marriage or a second marriage?"

His wife rejoined:

"How can you call it a second marriage, when she hasn't put her hair up yet in the Tu house?"

Pai nodded in agreement and asked:

"Who's the other match-maker?"

"Old Chu. Now, we must think up a wedding present."

"You suggest one."

"If you ask me, I think we'd better buy them something useful, instead of giving money or anything confiscated from the landlords."

"I agree. I'll get some wall pictures. We can give them a picture of the distribution of the confiscated property. Then there is another good picture called 'Counter-attack by the Allied Democratic Army.'"

His wife broke into a laugh, saying:

"Aiyoh! You'll make me split my sides. They have a wedding and you give them a 'counter-attack'!"

"Without counter-attacks, how could you have a wedding? Everything depends on what happens at the front. If the Democratic Army had not driven off the enemy, how could a poor man think of marrying today?"

Smiling, Mrs. Pai said:

"All right, you're right. Let's give them the pictures then. But I think we should get something else as well."

"We'll talk about that later. Is food ready?"

"I've kept some dumplings for you; I'm going to warm them. You just lie on the *kang* and rest a while."

Directly Pai lay down, he fell asleep. In the kitchen, his wife heard him snoring, quickly returned to the room, took a cotton-padded quilt off the low-legged table on the *kang* and covered him up.

Meanwhile, in the Peasants' Association, more people had arrived. Crowding round Hsiao, they were discussing heatedly and noisily how to distribute the confiscated property. Old Chu's bass boomed out, and Old Sun's high-pitched voice could be heard too. The noise woke Kuo, who sat up rubbing his eyes, then got off the *kang* and stood behind the crowd. Liu Kuei-lan, who had been watching him all along, now ran up to him without scruples and, jerking a finger at the west room, said quickly in an undertone:

"Go and sleep in that room. It's quieter."

With a shake of the head, Kuo told her that he did not want to sleep any more. He stepped nearer to the square table, to join in the discussion. Old Chu cried out with his powerful voice:

"All right, let's do as Team Leader Hsiao suggests—first look after the poorest. We'll provide for them first. We'll supply whatever's needed to whoever needs it."

Liu Teh-shan's wife cut him short with a question:

"Do middle peasants get the same treatment?"

Old Chu answered:

"We'll treat poor peasants, farmhands and poor middle peasants alike. If they need foodstuffs, they'll be given foodstuffs; if they've nothing to wear in the winter, they'll be given something. This year's distribution of the confiscated property is different from last year's. This year, we have more to dispose of. We can afford to be generous. We'll level things up a little before giving everybody a share. Does anybody object to this?"

Nobody objected, but Old Sun asked:

"You say everybody will get what he needs. But is that possible? We're short of so many things. I was given a leg of a horse last year, now I want a cart, ropes, a halter, brass rings, a yoke and what not."

Old Chu answered:

"It's impossible to supply carts. There are only a dozen carts altogether. How can you have one all to yourself? All the other things can be supplied, though."

Chang Ching-shui threw to Old Sun:

"If you can't make a yoke, how can you call yourself a carter?"

"Who says I can't? But if there is a yoke ready-made, I needn't make one."

Old Chu went on:

"Now listen. One more point. Last night, our small group agreed that the families of soldiers and men who died for the revolution—whether they lack anything or not—shall all be promoted one grade. Take Mrs. Chao for example. She was Grade One, but this would give her special priority. All proper poor peasants are now Grade One."

Old Sun hastened to ask:

"What grade is Donkey Li?"

Old Chu answered:

"He's a poor peasant. But has he been behaving properly? Let him tell us himself. Is Donkey Li here?"

Standing in a corner of the room, Donkey Li answered:

"I can hardly compare with the rest of you. I'm ready to accept any grade you people like to give me."

Old Sun suggested:

"Donkey Li has confessed to all his past wrong doings. Make him Grade Three."

Old Tien seconded the motion:

"I agree. Let him be Grade Three."

Old Chu asked:

"What about old Mrs. Wang?"

Old Tien suggested:

"Mrs. Wang did us all a great service. She deserves Grade One."

Old Chu objected:

"She seldom comes to meetings, and isn't an activist."

Old Tien insisted:

"This time she really deserves credit. If not for her information, we couldn't have caught Han Number Five. And if he had escaped, there would have been trouble."

Several voices from behind shouted in unison:

"Give her Grade One!"

Old Chu asked:

"What about those who have large families?"

Nobody was ready with an answer. None of the farmhands had a large family, and most of them were still bachelors. There might be some poor peasants with large families. Somebody proposed that

poor peasants with large families should be promoted to a higher grade. Grade One peasants with a family of four to six need not be promoted, but those with families of seven and upwards should be promoted to a higher grade. They debated this point for some time until Team Leader Hsiao supported the proposal. Unmarried poor peasants retained their original grade, but each would be allotted two shares of the confiscated articles, one for himself and one for his future wife.

Old Chu said:

"Our small group also thinks that the poorest peasants should be given horses as well as foodstuffs and clothes, while those not so badly off get better-looking clothes which need not be of such strong material."

Old Sun added:

"Our small group agrees to that. One point more—we think that horseless carters should have the right to choose horses."

All laughed, and Chang Ching-shui said with a smile:

"Don't worry. We could never leave you out."

Old Chu suggested:

"Don't argue any more. Time we started with the distribution. All the confiscated articles are on display in the school playground. Let's go over."

The meeting was adjourned. The peasants crunched over the snow, with children running ahead and old women hobbling behind. Hsiao, sitting at the square table, asked Kuo to stay behind. The latter took out his tobacco pouch, filled his pipe and went into the kitchen for a light. He came back, sat on the *kang* and asked:

"What's the good news waiting for me?"

Hsiao smiled—a kindly, well-wishing smile brightening his lean face. Kuo had never seen him look like this before. They had got to know each other well during the previous year. But they had always been in the thick of a struggle or up to their ears in work. They had never had time to talk about anything personal. Kuo looked upon Hsiao as a saint, a hero who was devoted to the cause of the masses, a completely selfless man who never talked about private hopes and desires. But there was something new in the team leader's smile today—he looked as if he wanted to say something personal. Surprised and overjoyed, Kuo puffed away at his pipe, glancing at his leader, waiting for him to speak. For his part,

Hsiao thought highly of Kuo as one of the best men in the village and cherished the hope of making a district Party secretary of him. Kuo's status was good, he was young, able and clear-headed, brave and cautious. He had been one of the first poor peasants to join the Party, to receive Party discipline. With some cultural and political education, he should make a good Party secretary.

Kuo, Hsiao believed, ought to get married and have a home, so that he could live better and work better. Instead of answering Kuo's question, Hsiao asked him:

"Would you like to settle down in a home of your own? Would you like a wife?"

Kuo turned scarlet, but he said nothing. He took refuge in puffing noisily at his pipe. Hsiao drew nearer and spoke in a lower voice:

"She suits you all right, and you know her well. She is able and active and first in everything."

Kuo knew who she was, but he remained silent, drawing energetically at his pipe. Hsiao continued:

"If you have no objection, Old Sun and Old Chu will be your match-makers."

With a blushing face and a thumping heart, Kuo removed his pipe and replied in a voice that trembled:

"I'm afraid of what people will say of me."

"What will people say of you? It's nothing wrong, getting married."

"People might say that I was looking after my own interests and letting down the Peasants' Association."

"Don't worry about that. No one will be so narrow-minded. That's settled, then. Shall we go and see how they're getting on with the distribution?"

They found the school playground swarming with people who were looking at piles of things of all sorts and descriptions—clothes, quilts, lengths of cloth, caps and shoes. There was ten times as much as had been confiscated the previous year from the landlords. The smallpox physician, holding in his hand a slate and a name list, called the first name—Mrs. Chao, widow of Chao Yu-lin who had died for the revolution. She answered from the back of the crowd and threaded her way to the front. She was dressed in a blue padded gown under a blue cotton jacket and was still wearing white mourning shoes. Villagers commented in an undertone:

"She's still in mourning."

"She's getting thinner."

"A model wife and widow. How many other women would behave like her? Don't ask them to remain widows for a *year*—most women nowadays find a new man before their husbands are cold."

"Brother Chao was a good man, so he had a good wife. Good pot for good stove; bad pot for bad stove."

"Be quiet, and let's see what she chooses."

Mrs. Chao was walking among heaps of garments. She wanted a quilt while her boy needed clothes, a cap and a pair of shoes. As she picked up a discoloured quilt, Old Chu exclaimed:

"That quilt is no good! Why not take a better one?"

"This is all right. It wouldn't do to scoop out the flesh of a melon and leave the rind to somebody else."

Even the swineherd Wu called out to her from a distance:

"Auntie, pick something better! They all want you to take the best of everything—if you refuse, they'll feel hurt."

She replied:

"I have what I want. This is good enough."

She proceeded to take a dogskin cap, a pair of padded shoes, a padded coat and a pair of padded trousers. Old Chu protested once more:

"Mrs. Chao, that cap is just too bad. Look, there is a better one right beside you. Let me choose for you!"

He sprang forward and began choosing for her when somebody cried out:

"Let her make her own choice. No one is allowed to choose for any one else."

Old Chu answered with a glare:

"Any one can choose for the family of a revolutionary martyr."

Old Chu rummaged among the garments until he had found a fur coat, a fox-fur cap and a small pair of blue padded shoes for So-chu. They were all practically new. Then he made for the pile of quilts and, after examining and rejecting one after another, he picked out a brand-new quilt with a woollen cover. As he carried this collection to the classroom to be registered, someone commented:

"Old Chu, you certainly have an eye for the best!"

Old Chu answered, glaring:

"Yes, my eyes are sharp, but did I choose for myself?"

Now the smallpox physician called Kuo to choose what he wanted. Standing beside Hsiao, Kuo hesitated to step forward but said in an embarrassed tone:

"Anything will do for me."

Old Sun chimed in:

"I'll choose for you, if you don't feel like doing it yourself."

Old Sun swooped upon a long gown lined with sheepskin, a thick quilt and a scarlet, flower-patterned, satin curtain. Chang Ching-shui asked, pointing at the curtain:

"What's the use of that?"

Old Sun answered with a wink:

"This is going to come in very useful soon. And after he's finished with it, you may want to use it."

The third on the list was Wu. Never, in all his born days, had he slept underneath a quilt. During those years as a swineherd in the Han house, he had slept in winter under a pile of straw, while the wind roared and whistled outside and snow pelted in at the window and piled up on the ledge. The eaves were hung with long, glistening icicles, which seemed to pierce the frozen heart of the boy as he gazed up at them from where he lay curled. His teeth chattering, he shivered from head to foot and his tears fell on the straw and the tattered mat. He dared not sob aloud, for fear of waking his master and making things worse for himself. Now, seeing the piles of quilts, he recalled those days of misery and shed tears once more—these were not tears of cold, however, but tears of gratitude for the new life that had replaced the old. All these warm quilts were now for poor men, and he could choose any one he liked. This was no small matter. The variety and colour dazzled his eyes. He was not attracted by the red silk and green satin quilts. "Splendid, yes—but they can't stand the wear and tear of one winter." He searched among the coarse and strong materials. Scarcely had he taken up one quilt, when he saw another equally good or even better. A third immediately presented itself and caused him to drop the second. He was continuously changing his mind, going to and fro, still empty-handed. Bystanders said: "He's dazzled by such a great choice."

"Old Chu, you pick one for him."

"No, Old Chu shouldn't interfere."

"Don't rush him. Let him choose for himself."

"It's getting dark. Better help him settle upon one. If he goes on at this rate, we shall have to wait until the almond tree blossoms and the sunflower runs to seed before he's made his choice."

Old Chu singled out a large, thick and strong quilt; and Wu laughed and agreed that this at last was the best of the lot.

Time was getting on, and it was suggested that several people should make their selections at the same time. Liu Kuei-lan emerged with a crimson flower-patterned padded jacket and two red lacquered glass-cases. Old Sun went up to her and said with a grin:

"So, you've chosen your dowry!"

Red in the face, Liu Kuei-lan pretended not to understand.

"What do you mean?"

Old Sun chuckled and said:

"If you pretend to be deaf, I'm not going to be your go-between. You ought, by rights, to be thanking me." As other villagers gathered round, Old Sun went on: "There's nothing to beat revolution. In the old days, girls like you were not allowed out of the house, let alone allowed to choose a husband and a dowry. Everything was managed by parents and match-makers. The match-makers were all-powerful—they could ruin your life. The trumpet blows and the bride arrives veiled. Goodness knows what she is like! Deaf? Dumb? Lame? Blind? Is she humpbacked? Chicken-breasted? The bridegroom feels as if a rabbit is jumping in his heart. He's all of a dither. The trumpet blows again, and bridegroom and bride kowtow to heaven and earth. He takes a peep at her—aha! He's in luck. She is good-looking! She is white and red, pretty as a flower!"

The villagers broke into peals of laughter. Old Sun's wife suddenly appeared among the throng and, throwing him a black look, scolded:

"You never-dying old loony!"

That night, when Old Sun returned home in high spirits, he discovered a red lacquered coffin, inscribed with the word LONGEVITY, under the eaves of his house. He was nonplussed. Striding into the room, he shouted to his wife:

"What did you choose that thing for?"

Old Sun's wife explained:

"I've got one foot in the grave. If I don't make provision now, but leave it to you, you're quite capable of rolling me up in a mat when I die and throwing me out for the wolves to eat."

Old Sun said nothing and went to sleep. At the crack of dawn, he got up, took up a large axe and hacked away at the coffin. When his wife woke up and hurried out to the yard, he had finished chopping the coffin lid to pieces. A tremendous quarrel ensued. The neighbours were aroused and came to mediate, but neither of the old couple would listen to them. Officers of the Peasants' Association also hurried to the scene, but to no purpose. It was Old Sun, after all, who had the last word.

"I told her to pick a coat, but she came home with a coffin," he declared. "I'm fifty-one this year and shall be only fifty-two next year. The revolution has succeeded and our Peasants' Association has taken firm root. We should all of us live to be at least one hundred. What do I want a coffin for? All right, firewood is expensive—I'll make firewood out of it. And I'll use the large pieces to make two benches for officers of the Peasants' Association to sit on when they come to visit us."

XXIII

EARLY the next morning, Pai Yu-shan returned to Shuangcheng.

The village officers were working in two sections. Team Leader Hsiao and Chang Ching-shui were trying Han Number Five in a small room in the Peasants' Association, while Kuo Chuan-hai, Old Chu and some other activists were distributing horses in the school playground. The horses which had been distributed "one leg to one peasant" the previous year had been fetched back and herded together with those recently confiscated from landlords or purchased with the gold and silver lately unearthed. The playground now contained about two hundred and eighty horses and mules, between twenty and thirty cows, and five donkeys. The animals were all graded, and so were the villagers who were to receive them. Each peasant would be able to get a whole animal, not just part of one. this time.

It was a bright midwinter day, not windy and not too cold. Villagers in threes and fours streamed into the school playground, clad in newly-allotted padded overcoats, long gowns, jackets, trousers. They crunched over the snow in their newly-acquired leather shoes. The rays of the sun glittered on the playground, which was swarm-

ing with animals. Horses were prancing and neighing; cows were mooing. The men examined the horses' teeth, colour and legs, comparing notes, passing judgement and cracking jokes.

"Land is no use unless you have a horse."

"You can't plough without a horse. Even a tiger would tire to death without turning a single clod."

"So the gold unearthed was spent on horses! Whose idea was this?"

"We all thought of it together."

"It's a grand idea!"

"This year, each family will have a draught animal. That's better than last year, when four families had to share one. And they could never agree—you take care of the horse while he won't; you feed it on kaoliang while he insists on hay; you want it to draw a cart while he wants it to turn a mill! There was always trouble!"

Old Sun went up to a blue gelding and said:

"This is no young horse—it may be as old as I am." He jacked open its mouth with his hands, exclaiming:

"Look! No marks!"

The swineherd Wu asked curiously:

"What do you mean—no marks?"

Old Sun asked:

"Swineherd, what's your age?"

"Fourteen. Why?"

Old Sun boasted:

"At fourteen, I was an experienced groom. You're still a swineherd, eh! Come on, I'll tell you, an old horse has lost the mark in its teeth through much grinding, and its age can be judged by these things. A young horse is different—come on and take a look. . . ." He led Wu to a grey stallion, pulled its lips back with his hands, and explained:

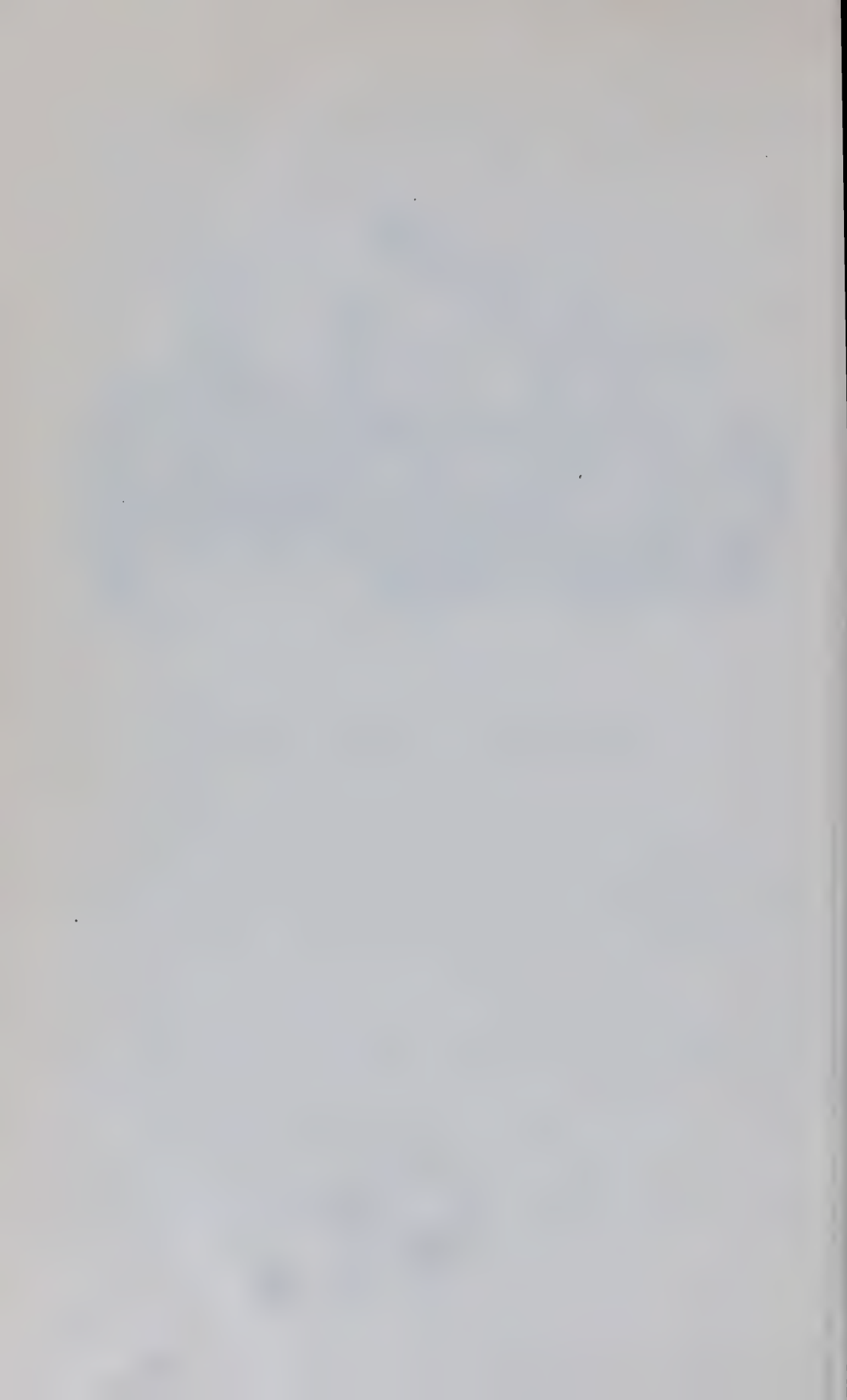
"Do you see those pits in the crowns of its incisors? They are called marks. As the horse grows older, the marks wear away through much chewing, and the horse has, consequently, 'no marks.' Understand now?"

Wu withdrew a few steps, ready to run, then called out mischievously:

"You've done a lot of chewing in your time. Let's see whether you've marks or no marks in your teeth!"



The distribution of draught animals



Old Sun wheeled round and lunged forth, but the boy was already gone. The old carter sighed and said:

"At fourteen, I was a groom, and much better than this monkey of a swineherd. He doesn't know the difference between a young horse and an old one, yet, he calls himself a peasant. He knows only how to swear."

Kuo Chuan-hai, standing behind a rectangular table, knocked the bowl of his long stemmed pipe against the edge of the table and declared:

"Quiet, please. The distribution of horses will begin now. Every poor peasant family is entitled to one useful animal, a horse or a cow, as you like. Men have grades and numbers; animals have grades and no numbers. Remember your own grade and number, and, when your number is called, go and pick a beast. Grade One horses and cows are tethered to the elms on the west side of the playground."

Men crowded round the table, and several of them cried out:

"Don't waste your breath—we all understand. Let's get started right away. It's nearly noon."

Kuo clambered up on to the table, which creaked under his weight. He shouted at the top of his voice:

"Wait a minute! One point more! We've free clothes and free horses. Who got these things for us?"

A thunder of voices answered him:

"The Communist Party!"

Kuo went on:

"Every day when you watch the beasts working for you—drawing carts, turning grindstones, ploughing fields, hauling fuel—don't forget who gave you them. It would never do to forget."

Many voices answered together:

"How could we forget? We're not like the gunner Hua."

Kuo said:

"All right, we'll start taking our shares now." He got off the table. The smallpox physician, holding a slate in his hand, called out the first number. Number One was Mrs. Chao. She withdrew behind the others and waved her hand, declining her share. Old Chu ran up and asked:

"Mrs. Chao, why refuse it?"

Holding So-chu with her right hand, Mrs. Chao waved her left hand, answering:

"We've no man in our house—a horse or a cow would be wasted on us. Let the families with manpower have the animals."

Old Chu argued:

"Don't be so foolish. Take a horse, and it will turn the millstone and haul firewood for you, and you needn't ask anybody to lend you a hand."

Mrs. Chao said:

"Wu will soon be living on his own, and then we shan't need much fuel and shan't have much use for the grindstone. I'd better not take one."

Old Sun, standing by, thought to himself that if Mrs. Chao had a horse he could always borrow it from her to team up with his own on occasions in future. Other neighbours were not so generous as she. So, he tried to talk her over:

"I think you had better take a horse. If you've no time to feed it, just let me keep it in my place, and you and I shall feed it by shifts. If a revolutionary martyr's family refuses a horse, who does deserve one I'd like to know?"

Mrs. Chao was adamant, however. Then the smallpox physician called upon the second name on the list—Kuo Chuan-hai. Old Sun ran up to Kuo and whispered into his ear:

"That one tied to the left of the old elm is a young blue mare. She is young. In spring, she will throw a foal, and you'll have two horses instead of one. Hurry up and grab her!"

Kuo answered with a smile:

"In spring, if she throws a foal, how am I to plough my fields?"

"In just a month she'll be working again."

Kuo was very casual where only his own interest was concerned. He thought one horse was just as good as another, so he followed Old Sun's advice, led the blue mare away and tied her to a tree stump in front of the window of the classroom. Then, he rejoined the others.

When Old Chu's name was called, he was already standing next to the bullock of his choice. A bullock was strong and need not be fed during the night; it was not like a horse or an ass which must eat bean-cakes and kaoliang, or else lose weight. He was short of foodstuffs this year, so a bullock would suit him nicely. If it proved too slow, he could change it for a horse next year. He was leading away a shiny black bullock, when a youngster shouted after him:

"Old Chu, are you taking a bullock instead of a horse because you're afraid of doing public transport service?"

Old Chu shouted back over his shoulder:

"Get away with you! Who's afraid of doing public transport service? When my turn comes, I'll borrow a horse from a neighbour."

Old Tien went up to Old Sun and asked:

"Which horse do you want?"

Old Sun answered:

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

As a matter of fact, he had already fixed on a chestnut colt with a right eye like a marble. The moment he heard his name called, he strode forward to lead the colt away. Chang Ching-shui said jokingly:

"Old Sun has picked a blind colt!"

Old Sun vaulted upon the slippery back of the colt, which began kicking and prancing, unaccustomed to the weight. While stroking its neatly cut mane, Old Sun retorted:

"This horse—blind? *You're* the one who's blind. This is the pick of the lot—a horse with a 'jade eye.' This is the best horse in this village. It will never go blind."

Wu yelled:

"Grandpa, take care! Keep talking—and you'll come a cropper!"

Old Sun answered:

"Don't worry about me. I have been a carter for twenty-nine years; do you think I'm afraid of a colt? I've ridden all sorts of wild horses in my time! But did you ever see me fall?"

Just then, the colt pranced higher than ever, its two hind legs kicking up the snow. Old Sun, falling silent and turning deathly pale, clutched desperately at its mane; but the wild thing galloped about the playground, defying all efforts to stop it. In another moment, the carter was thrown. The colt raced through the throng, shot out onto the road and disappeared. Kuo quickly untied his blue mare, vaulted upon it and raced to overtake Old Sun's "jade eye." A cluster of men stood around the supine carter, laughing down at him. While he was still groaning and unable to retort, the spectators opened fire on him:

"How did you come down? Is the ground smoother than the back of the horse?"

"This is nothing. When did you ever see Old Sun fall?"

"Old Sun is the cleverest man in this village. He can drive, he can ride and he can fall. He falls beautifully. What a crash there was when he hit the ground!"

Old Sun was lying supine. His backside ached, and he was too busy groaning to indulge in repartee. Several men hoisted him up, wiped the snow off his clothes and asked if he was hurt. Old Sun stood up, grumbling:

"Bastard! See if I won't give you a dressing-down! Aiyoh! Here! Rub this place! The little devil! Aiyoh! Keep on rubbing."

Kuo rode back with Old Sun's "jade eye" in tow, both man and horses panting. Old Sun limped to a wood pile, picked up a cane, and went to revenge himself upon the colt. With one hand he held the horse by the bit and with the other he lifted the cane. The cane stopped, however, halfway, and was thrown to the ground. Old Sun was a true lover of horses.

The villagers went on picking the horses they liked. Mrs. Pai took a mule and Chang Ching-shui's mother took a horse. Old Tien and his wife selected a chestnut stallion, and were both delighted. Big Li being absent, Liu Teh-shan's wife picked a silver-grey gelding for him and tethered it in her stable.

Donkey Li was changing for the better, working hard and dealing with people honestly. He was on the list of the beneficiaries. When his turn came, he wanted neither a horse nor a cow. The smallpox physician asked him:

"What *do* you want, then?"

"I want my own two donkeys back."

"Go ahead and take them away."

When Donkey Li and his donkeys were plodding slowly home, some villagers walking behind them remarked:

"He's got his property back."

"Now, Donkey Li lives up to his name."

Silent, Donkey Li was happy and sad at the same time. Happy to have recovered the donkeys which the landlord had taken from him. Sad to recall his wife and child, who would never return. One of the villagers must have guessed what was in his mind, for he said:

"Donkey Li, now you've got your donkeys back, if you work

hard for a year you should be able to marry and have a happy family life again."

About three hundred families were in the highest spirits—all but old Mrs. Wang and her two boys who had received a "hot-haired" horse. This horse lost all its hair in winter; consequently, it shivered with cold all the time and could not go out. In summer, it grew long, thick hair, and was so hot that it lay lolling, panting and perspiring on the ground. Leading this "hot-haired" horse, old Mrs. Wang hobbled disconsolately about the playground sighing whenever she met anyone. Old Sun tried to comfort her:

"Don't worry. Soak half a bushel of millet in the well and feed your horse on it. Cure guaranteed."

Old Tien also prescribed:

"When you kill your pig on New Year's Eve, feed your horse with warm pig blood. That will fix him all right."

Old Mrs. Wang answered:

"Then, I must wait until New Year."

Seeing how upset she was, Kuo came up and asked:

"What's the matter? Is there anything wrong with your horse?"

"Hot-haired."

Kuo answered at once:

"I'll swop with you. Look at that blue mare in front of the window over there. Do you like it?"

Old Mrs. Wang glanced at the mare and answered with a shake of her head:

"She's in foal. In the cold weather, it will be difficult to take care of the foal, and then, she won't be able to work in the spring sowing."

Kuo called together several activists, who squatted down in the sun behind the haystack to discuss old Mrs. Wang's problem. Doodling in the snow with the bowl of his stemmed pipe, Kuo said:

"Team Leader Hsiao says that progressive people should help backward people. So we should do what we can for old Mrs. Wang. She did something very creditable recently. But for her information, we could not have caught Han Number Five. If he were still in hiding, we could not live in peace to enjoy all the good things we have received."

Old Sun agreed with a nod:

"If he were still in hiding, he might try to take revenge."

Kuo proposed:

"She's not satisfied with her 'hot-haired' horse, and I am quite willing to let her take my blue mare. The trouble is, she doesn't like my horse. What shall we do?"

Old Sun repeated:

"What shall we do?"

Old Chu offered:

"If she likes, I'll give her my bullock."

Mrs. Pai, remembering what her husband had said, offered:

"I've a blue mule. If she likes it, she can have it."

With two sons taking part in the revolution, one in the army and the other as village public security officer, Chang Ching-shui's mother felt that if she was selfish and backward she would be letting them down. So she said:

"I'm willing to change my grey gelding for her horse."

Old Tien ran to the west end of the playground, sought out his wife among the crowd and, after getting her approval, came back and said:

"Let her take my chestnut stallion."

Old Sun, seeing that even Old Tien was willing to change horses, said generously:

"I'm willing to let her have my 'jade eye.'" He immediately regretted this generous impulse, however, for he added hastily: "But I'm afraid she can't manage such a wild colt."

Old Chu retorted:

"Don't you worry about that. She has two sons to take care of a colt."

Kuo said, standing up:

"All right, then, we'll collect all the horses here, and let her choose one."

Then, Kuo took old Mrs. Wang to the haystack, where all the horses were ready for her to choose from. She said: "Never mind. There's no need to change. It wouldn't be right to give you a bad horse." Yet she was casting stealthy glances at one horse after another. Kuo led his blue mare right up to her and said sincerely:

"This mare is strong and young, and she's going to foal. In spring, you'll have two horses—take her home now."

After one look at the mare's drooping ears, the old lady gave a shake of her head and hobbled off. Old Sun felt his heart thumping, and said with a forced smile:

"Old Chu's big, black bullock is a good beast, and you needn't get up to feed it at night. That black mule over there is also very good. But horses are difficult to manage and great eaters. One horse eats at least five catties of bean-cakes every day, besides five catties of kaoliang and fifteen catties of hay. It's very, very expensive, Mrs. Wang, keeping a horse!"

Old Mrs. Wang glanced at Old Chu's bullock and Mrs. Pai's mule, but gave each animal a disapproving shake of her head. Then she walked up to Old Sun's colt. The carter, feeling giddy, said with a forced smile:

"Are you interested in my poor horse? It's true, it's a poor creature. And wild!"

Old Chu threw in his teeth:

"Didn't you say just now that your horse is a 'jade-eyed' treasure, the best horse in the village? Now you say it's a poor creature."

Old Mrs. Wang stepped nearer to the "jade eye" and began stroking its shiny chestnut back. Old Sun exclaimed:

"Don't touch him! He's a regular demon. Take care! He may kick you. He threw me just now. He's nothing to look at either, with that glassy eye of his which makes him look blind." Old Sun had suddenly changed the horse's "jade eye" into glassy eye. He went on to enumerate all his horse's bad points without mentioning one of its good points, and concluded: "Nobody wants him. I only took him because he was a gift; otherwise, I wouldn't have had him."

The old lady either disliked the colt or trusted Old Sun, for she turned away. Then Old Sun leaped onto the colt's back, seized its mane firmly with both hands and rode off saying: "If you don't want it, I'll take it away."

Old Mrs. Wang went up to Old Tien's chestnut horse. This was a sleek beast with strong legs, neither too old nor too young, and the old lady decided to have it. Old Tien said with a smile:

"Take it."

After that, they dispersed. Old Tien led the "hot-haired" horse home and tied it up. When he stepped into the room, he

found his old woman looking glum. Knowing what was troubling her, Old Tien said:

"Don't worry. It ploughs and draws just like any other horse."

Old Mrs. Tien answered:

"That chestnut gelding was fat and strong. This is nothing to that. Who wants a horse like this?"

"I can fix it up all right. Pour half a bushel of millet into a basket and soak it in the well, then feed the horse on it. We've millet to spare. That way it can be cured."

Old Mrs. Tien muttered:

"We changed meat for bones. I don't feel happy about it. Besides, we're no better off than old Mrs. Wang—we're worse off."

"You're not willing to make a sacrifice. What's the matter with you? You've forgotten all about our daughter who chose to die rather than give her man away. You're her mother, but you don't learn from her. You can't sacrifice even a horse. Besides, this horse can be cured of its 'hot hair.'"

"To be sure, it can be cured." This was from outside the window, a man's voice, taking the old couple by surprise. Old Mrs. Tien asked:

"Who's that?"

"It's me. Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Oh! Chairman Kuo, isn't it? Come on in quick; it's so cold outside."

Kuo stepped into the room, smiling, and said:

"My blue mare is outside in the courtyard. If you don't like your horse, let's swop."

Old Mrs. Tien, touched by Kuo's example, said, smiling:

"Oh, no. We can cure our horse. Keep your mare. Everybody in the village has a horse now—that's grand. In the old days when we poor peasants had no horses, we were hard put to it to till our land."

Kuo pressed them, but the Tiens wouldn't hear of taking his horse. Then, Kuo said upon leaving:

"Let's settle it this way. When my blue mare foals next spring, it will be yours."

XXIV

AFTER the distribution of the horses, Kuo made a report to Hsiao, then stayed on to watch the trial of Han Number Five by Hsiao, Chang Ching-shui and two representatives of the public security office of the county.

There was yet no result after three nights' hearing of the case. Hsiao strictly observed the instructions of the provincial Party committee and the government prohibiting corporal punishment or the use of force in any form. Han Number Five was good at playing deaf and dumb. He would smile or shed tears, but he would not confess. The others clenched their fists in fury, but Hsiao never for a moment lost his temper. He advised his colleagues:

"Easy does it. Let him take his time. If he refuses to talk for a month, we'll keep at him for one month. If he refuses to talk for a year, we'll keep at him for a year. The longer he delays, the worse for him. When finally he confesses, he will wish he had done so earlier." And he said to Kuo: "You had better start preparations for a redistribution of land. Don't delay any longer. The provincial authorities want it done before the time comes to put down manure."

Kuo went off. The interrogation went on, far into the night. Old Mrs. Wang, who had informed against Han Number Five, did not dare to appear as a witness. Hsiao was wondering how to get Han to confess, when Wan announced:

"The stretcher-bearers have come back."

Presently, the husky voice of a man asked in the courtyard:

"Is Team Leader Hsiao in?"

It was the blacksmith Big Li, Li Chang-yu. When Hsiao answered: "Yes, I'm in here," Big Li barged into the room. With a brand-new captured American tommy gun slung over his shoulder, he ducked in the doorway, from a habitual fear of knocking his head against the lintel. Liu Teh-shan, the middle peasant, walking in after him, said jokingly:

"The lintel is way over your head. Why make such a low bow upon entering?"

Hsiao rose to welcome them home, shook hands with them and looked them up and down. Tanned, dressed in a captured U.S.

army uniform, one armed with a tommy gun and the other with a flask dangling from his belt, these two men looked anything but peasants. Hsiao asked them into the inner room, up on to the *kang*, and said with a smile:

"What a time you two must have had!"

Liu Teh-shan answered with a smile, his forehead wrinkling:

"That's nothing. You people in the rear work just as hard."

Wan picked up a long stemmed pipe, filled the bowl with a pinch of tobacco, lighted it at the stove and invited Big Li to smoke. Slinging the gun off his shoulder and laying it carefully on the *kang*, the big man said:

"No, thanks. I've my own pipe." He pulled out of the left pocket of his coat a short, fat, big-bowled pipe. As he filled the bowl, he declared:

"This is a gift from Commander Li—a souvenir, and a trophy too."

Hsiao said, smiling:

"Yes, I can see you're loaded with trophies. Well, have they all come back?"

Big Li asked, holding the pipe between his teeth:

"Who? You mean the stretcher-bearers? Yes, the forty men for five stretchers from our village have all come back. At the front, we twice saved some money out of our meal allowance for eggs for the wounded."

Hsiao turned to Liu Teh-shan and asked him with a grin:

"How goes it with you, Old Liu?"

Big Li quickly put in a word for Liu:

"Liu Teh-shan has won a merit. In one battle, before the enemy had withdrawn and ceased fire, he was already running about, looking for the wounded in the field."

Liu Teh-shan said:

"That's nothing. The Eighth Route Army men at the front are all peasants like us. They're brave. Why should stretcher-bearers funk?"

Hsiao mused. This man Liu had formerly been a coward, a fence-sitter. In the fight against the landlord Han Number Six, he had not dared to venture out. After coming back from the front, he was ten times the man he had been. Hsiao couldn't stop smiling and asked:

"Did you see those 'Central Army' men?"

Liu laughed:

"Oh, yes. They're like bedraggled chickens."

Hsiao asked jokingly:

"Weren't you afraid they might cut your throat?"

Liu Teh-shan did not think this question required an answer. He said with a grin:

"Those soldiers couldn't fight. For all their better weapons, they're no good—no match at all for our fighters. One heavy blow, and they're finished."

Liu went on to describe the heroism of our fighters at the front, and how even the badly wounded would not leave their positions. Hsiao said:

"It must have been an education for you."

Liu responded:

"Yes, I've learned a lot."

Big Li added:

"Ask Liu to tell you how with one stick he captured two tommy guns."

Meanwhile, a crowd had gathered around Big Li. They listened as he told the story: One night, in Szepingchieh, Liu was on sentry duty at a village cross-road, armed with nothing but a stick. It was dark with a few stars glittering in the sky and impossible to see more than a few feet away. The enemy had been defeated, and were running in all directions. Suddenly, Liu espied two shadows moving stealthily in the murky gloom across the road. He immediately levelled his stick as if it were a gun, and shouted like a soldier:

"Who goes there? Halt!"

The shadows stopped in their tracks and crouched down, each with a long rod horizontally over its head. When Liu approached and looked at them closely—the shadows turned out to be two soldiers of the Chiang Kai-shek army, and the rods were two tommy guns. Liu's sudden shout had frightened the Kuomintang soldiers into kneeling on the ground. Liu ran forward to collect the guns, and marched the prisoners off.

Big Li added:

"The commander gave us one of the guns."

The villagers crowded round to look at the gun, laughing, and some moved the lock up and down. Hsiao said to Li and Liu:

"Go home and rest. This evening, we'll hold a meeting to welcome you home. Then all the villagers can hear your story."

Li and Liu went off. When the latter reached home, he found his wife ladling slop into the pot, cooking pig-feed. Seeing him, she quickly laid down the ladle and washed her hands in an earthen bowl. She called to her seven-year-old boy, who had been crying in the west room for pork dumplings:

"Koutsuntse, look! Who's home?"

Liu Teh-shan was stepping into the east room, when Koutsuntse ran across the yard, clasped his father's leg and called:

"Daddy!" Liu Teh-shan picked him up, and laid him on the south *kang*. He himself sat down on the edge of the *kang*, puffing at his pipe. The little boy, now riding on his father's leg, began to toy with the buttons on the captured American uniform, telling him that during the New Year they had eaten pork dumplings for a whole fortnight, and that his mother had beaten him once because he was disobedient. Meanwhile, Liu Teh-shan's wife was running in and out of the rooms, not knowing what to do, giddy with joy at Liu's home-coming. She urged him to lie down and rest, but in the same breath asked whether he would like something to eat. Taking the pipe from his mouth, he answered:

"I've had enough to eat at the county seat. County Chairman Liu gave us a meal and made a speech."

The boy chimed in:

"County Chairman Liu visited our village last year."

His mother cut him short:

"Don't interrupt, Koutsuntse. Just listen to your daddy. What did the county chairman say?"

"He said: 'You have won a merit. The troops at the front and the people in the rear will not forget what you have done. Now, go back to your village and play a leading part in production.'"

"Have you seen Team Leader Hsiao?"

"I left him just a moment ago. There will be a big meeting this evening. I'm to say something about the front. Will you come?"

After bustling about for a while, Mrs. Liu finally wiped her hands with a rag, sat down on the *kang* and began to chat with her husband. She said: "The Peasants' Association realized they'd gone too far in some cases, and middle peasants who were unfairly

classified as rich peasants are now back in their right place. Things which were wrongly confiscated have now been given back. We've taken back our two horses. Team Leader Hsiao says that all the poor, hired and middle peasants are one family—that the poor and hired peasants are bones while the middle peasants are flesh; but they can't do without each other."

Puffing at his pipe, Liu Teh-shan said: "At the front, we had the same problem. Commander Li told us: 'All soldiers from families of poor, hired and middle peasants fight against the common enemy equally well. All the farmhands and poor and middle peasants must be united before they can defeat the reactionary forces.'"

She told him that during his absence Team Leader Hsiao, Chairman Kuo and Mrs. Chao had called to see her and told her not to worry about him. They had been very considerate. Chairman Kuo had also advised her not to believe in rumours and assured her that no surplus farm produce would be confiscated. Anybody who produced more than was required could keep it; it wouldn't be taken over. In a satisfied and grateful tone, Mrs. Liu went on: "After paying the tax in kind, I had our grain and all carted home and stored up in the barn, the potatoes in the pit. Nobody ever suggested that our grain and potatoes should go to the public granary. That had been a rumour spread by those reactionaries." She drew nearer to her husband and spoke in an undertone: "Have you seen Han Number Five?" Liu nodded his head, sucked at his pipe and remained silent. She whispered: "Do you think he'll try to injure us? That year, he visited us and wanted you to be his sworn brother. I'm afraid he may do us a bad turn."

Knocking the bowl of his pipe against the edge of the *kang*, her husband cut her short: "We did nothing wrong. What are you afraid of? Stand straight, and your shadow won't be crooked. Do nothing wrong, and no ghost will knock at your door. Team Leader Hsiao knows that it was only because I was timid and afraid of trouble that I hid in my hut when they were settling scores with Han Number Six last year. I showed up badly then. That's something I'm ashamed of. But I never did anything worse than that. Team Leader Hsiao knows all about me. He wouldn't believe anything Han Number Five might say. He would check up first."

Mrs. Liu's face crinkled in a smile, and she said:

"Now I feel better. You must be tired—why don't you lie down and get some sleep? It's early yet, and the meeting won't be until the evening. I've some pork dumplings left over from New Year frozen. Every day, Koutsuntse pestered me to let him eat them, but I was keeping them for you, counting on your coming home soon. The magpies had been calling, so I felt sure you wouldn't be long.¹ But I never thought it could be so soon. Get off that *kang*, Koutsuntse, and make room for your daddy to sleep a while. You go and get some fuel."

Liu took a pillow off the low-legged table and lay down on the *kang* in his uniform. His wife lit a fire in the outer room and the smoke, drifting into the inner room, made his eyes smart. Unable to fall asleep, he got up, took his pipe and was walking out, when she asked:

"Where are you going? Aren't you going to rest?"

Pushing open the door, he answered:

"I want to look at the horses."

But he changed his mind and walked across the yard to see the crates of maize standing by the gate. The crates were overflowing with golden maize. He turned to the backyard to look at the fuel he had stacked there before he went to the front. During the last five months, two and a half of the three stacks had been burnt. He puffed at his pipe, thinking that he must go to collect some more cartloads of fuel in a few days' time. Then, he turned his eyes to the haystacks and saw that one out of three had been used up. He looked into the stable and cried out in surprise:

"Hullo! Where did this extra horse come from?"

His wife answered from inside the house:

"That silver-grey gelding is Big Li's. I thought, since he was at the front with you, I had better pick a horse for him and take care of it while he was away."

Liu nodded his approval, then went into the house, picked up a bean-cake from a corner, cut it in two with a knife and put one half to soak in a bucket for the horses' feed in the evening. Then,

¹ In China, some people regard it as a sign of good luck to hear magpies calling.

he walked to the backyard to have a look at the pit. In a few minutes, he came back with a rotten potato in his hand and said to his wife:

"Half of the potatoes are spoiled. When you pitted them, you must have forgotten to pick out the rotten ones. During the rainy season in the autumn, they spoil easily. Later, we must get them out and sun them."

Liu Teh-shan walked all round the house, seeing that everything was in order. He was a good farmer—able, experienced and hard working. His neighbours admired his ability, but felt that he was a little selfish. Every grain of maize he produced was fat, and every corn-cob was more than one foot long. Some asked him: "Same kind of land, same amount of labour, same kind of seed, but our crop is not as good as yours. How is it?" Every time, he evaded the question and made an excuse to slip off. The previous year he had heard the rumours that middle peasants were to be attacked and Li Chen-chiang's wife had said: "This is terrible! Whoever produces more will be fought. Two horses out of three, and one out of two, will be confiscated, and extra produce will go to the public granary." She concluded: "Your two horses don't matter so much. It's your own safety I'm worried about."

Liu was nearly frightened out of his wits. It happened that stretcher-bearers were wanted for the front, and he made haste to join up not as an activist, but as a fugitive from the impending storm. At the front, he witnessed the defeat of the Kuomintang army and freed himself of one of his fears. The officers and men at the front treated him affectionately and reposed great confidence in him, and Big Li was good to him too. Caring for the wounded, he steeled himself. Later, with only a stick in his hand he disarmed two enemy soldiers, and the men looked upon him with new respect. The result was that Liu, who had formerly had a foot in both camps, came home a different man. His wife, too, was changing for the better, under the influence of Mrs. Chao. They were both heart and soul with the Peasants' Association now.

Liu Teh-shan returned to the inner room and smoked one more pipe. Meanwhile, his wife set the table with three dishes: pork with pickled cabbage and green vermicelli; fried bean-curd; pork dumplings—a feast, more sumptuous than the New Year dinner! The dumplings were left over from New Year, and she had pre-

pared the two extra dishes on the chance of his coming home, after hearing the magpies calling.

At the meeting that evening most of the stretcher-bearers spoke about their experiences at the front. Han Number Five had been fetched in, too, to listen. While Liu Teh-shan was relating his experiences, Chang Ching-shui saw Han turning first red then white, looking down and sighing. When Liu spoke of the Kuomintang army's defeat, Han rose and walked out of the room. Chang Ching-shui was on the point of calling him back, when Hsiao stopped him, saying in an undertone: "Let him go." Chang obeyed but, not feeling easy about the prisoner, he followed him out. In the courtyard, Han walked up and down in agitation, paused, mused and walked again. He paused again, kicked his leather shoe against the snow and the mud, thought hard, then muttered: "Finished . . . defeated . . . no more. . . ." Liu Teh-shan, one of his potential collaborators, had just declared: "The Chiang bandit army can't fight." Han sat down on the threshold of the penthouse, rested his chin on his upturned palms and mused. Chang Ching-shui went out to the road, found the little swineherd Wu on sentry duty and asked him in a low tone:

"Do you know who's in the courtyard?"

Holding a spear, Wu answered:

"I know. Don't worry. He can't possibly escape."

Han Number Five rose, paced the yard, then re-entered the room. He went up to Hsiao and said:

"Can I have a word with you?"

Hsiao answered:

"All right."

The team leader followed Han through the throng out into the courtyard and stepped into the west wing. After some time the meeting broke up, and the peasants went back to their homes. In the west wing, Hsiao and Han were still talking. The oil in the lamp-dish ran low three times and Wan refilled the dish. Then, the cock began crowing, but still they did not stop. The eastern sky paled and then turned red, and Wan woke up to overhear Han saying in conclusion: "I've told you everything. There is nothing more. Those men I know, and I don't know anybody else. In the year of the Japanese surrender, I was detailed to this village by order of the Kuomintang army. I stayed overnight with my

brother and got in touch with the men whose names I've just given you. I also called to see Liu Teh-shan. Liu was afraid of both sides. The next time I sent for him, he dared not come, but went to another village. I've told you the truth. I know now that in the past I did wrong. If you can pardon me, I'll turn over a new leaf. If I'm lying, may the god of thunder strike me dead!"

After Hsiao had sent Han Number Five off, the team leader did not go to sleep. He instructed Chang Ching-shui to arrest the Kuomintang agents whom Han had told him were hiding in the village. At the same time he ordered two public security officers to take Han's confession and his lists of secret agents' names to the county public security office. One list of names of bandits in hiding in other counties and of the weapons they had concealed was to be transmitted as a "top-secret" document by the county authorities to the provincial authorities.

XXV

HSIAO spent another day winding up the case of Han Number Five. In the evening, the villagers discussed how to measure the land to be redistributed. Under the big, kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling, the team leader made his appearance, beaming all over and obviously unusually happy. He mounted the *kang* with a leap and declared:

"Comrades, friends! We have overthrown the landlords. The might of feudalism is no more. The landlords were open foes of the people. The agents sent by the Chiang and American reactionaries are hidden enemies; and as long as we don't mop them up they will threaten our safety. A few days ago, we caught one of them. As you all know, he is Han Number Five, brother of Han Number Six. We questioned him for three nights, but he refused to confess. Only when he heard the returned stretcher-bearers' reports of our victories at the front and realized that the Chiang bandits are finished, did he make his confession."

This news was greeted with thunderous applause, lasting several minutes. Hsiao waited until the clapping had stopped and then resumed:

"Han confessed that he was a special service man in the employ of the Japanese imperialists, and, after the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, he became an agent of the Chiang reactionaries. When he heard Li Chang-yu and Liu Teh-shan report on the military situation and the defeat of the Kuomintang army, he knew that it was all up with the reactionaries and that his own position was hopeless—only then did he make up his mind to confess. After the Japanese surrender, he came to this village, got in touch with his relatives, neighbours, friends, sworn brothers and some bad elements connected with some of the missionaries. He started operations and established a network of agents. He confessed to certain bad eggs in this village. He said that the former chairman of the Peasants' Association, Chang Fu-ying. . . ." Hsiao paused to cough and a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd. Some felt happy and some worried. Those who had had something to do with Chang Fu-ying, frequenting his flapjack shop or currying favour with his mistress Little Mi, now took fright. A woman asked:

"What sort of man is he?"

Hsiao answered, grinning:

"A seller of flapjacks."

A ripple of amusement ran through the room, relieving the tension. Still, impatient people reiterated:

"What sort of man is he?"

"Is he a bad egg?"

Hsiao answered:

"He's half Kuomintang—he acts as a stooge for real agents. There is another man behind him."

Several voices asked together:

"Who's that other man?"

Hsiao answered:

"Li Kuei-yung, the nephew of Li Chen-chiang. That young man is a real spy serving under Han Number Five."

Before Hsiao had finished, Old Sun leaped off the *kang* and started pushing his way out crying:

"Let's go and catch him! So that dog is a spy! Who's coming along?"

Chang Ching-shui said, laughing:

"Do you think we've waited for you to do the job?"

Kuo Chuan-hai also laughed and said:

"If we'd waited for you, Li Kuei-yung would be up the mountain by now."

Hsiao resumed, beaming amid applause and clapping:

"In 'The Present Situation and Our Tasks,' Chairman Mao Tse-tung says: 'Now . . . the rear of the People's Liberation Army is much safer and stronger than before. . . .' Yes, we are safe and strong today. Our Commander Lin Piao has won big victories at the front. Li Chang-yu, Liu Teh-shan and the other comrades saw the victory with their own eyes."

Sitting on the edge of the *kang*, Liu Teh-shan removed his pipe from his mouth and said with a nod:

"Yes! It was a great victory. There were as many prisoners of war as locusts—trainloads and trainloads of them."

Hsiao resumed:

"The 'Central Army' can never come back—not unless they come over to our side, surrender or get taken prisoner."

Liu Teh-shan puffed at his pipe, nodded his head and said:

"Yes, we don't mind taking them prisoner."

Hsiao continued:

"Here in the rear, we've caught our hidden enemies. We've pretty well cleaned up both open and hidden foes. What should we do next?" Many among the audience answered at once:

"Increase production."

Hsiao echoed:

"Yes, increase production."

Some women giggled. Old Sun, sitting next to them, asked:

"What are you laughing at?"

One said:

"Team Leader Hsiao has picked up our accent."

Old Sun said:

"There is nothing surprising about that. Drinking our local water, of course he speaks with our local accent."

Hsiao went on:

"You've been discussing how to redistribute the land. This is an important job, and I hope you'll do it well. After this there will be no more redivision: the Government will issue land deeds to the owners. What's more important to us peasants than land? In such a matter nobody should yield to anybody else. Men and

women, old and young, all have a right to a piece of land. Han Number Five, Li Kuei-yung and Chang Fu-ying will be taken off your hands—they'll go to the county. Now, land division is the order of the day. I suggest that a special committee be set up. Land is not like clothes—if the land is not divided well, it will be bad for production." Then Hsiao stepped out into the courtyard, gave Chang Ching-shui a letter of introduction to the county authorities and ordered five militiamen to escort the prisoners to the county seat. Han Number Five and Chang Fu-ying were not tied, while Li Kuei-yung was. Chang Ching-shui commented:

"That's the difference between confession and denial. One is tied up, and the other isn't. Li deserves a little discomfort."

Hsiao returned to the meeting, took his place in the corner and listened to the discussions going on between small groups.

Kuo called out:

"Please be quiet. We'll elect a land-distribution committee first."

An old man said:

"I propose Old Sun."

Liu Teh-shan's wife said:

"I propose Mrs. Pai."

Old Chu leaped up from the bench on which he was sitting and said:

"It's no joke, redividing the land. How can we make old men and women responsible for it?"

Mrs. Liu rejoined:

"Don't look down upon us women. Mrs. Pai is more able than most men. She used to weed landlords' fields, so she knows all the land very well."

Old Sun stood up, brushed the dust off his coat and said:

"Yes, Mrs. Pai is good. I am no good."

Several men answered together:

"Don't be so humble."

Ignoring them, Old Sun went on:

"I would like to propose a man everybody knows—the best man in the village. But for him, Han Number Five wouldn't have been caught."

Wu called out from the *kang*:

"It's Chairman Kuo, I know! We all want him."

Then, Big Li and Old Chu were proposed. But when Big Li named Liu Teh-shan, an argument ensued. Old Chu said:

"Liu is a middle peasant. That won't do."

Big Li answered: "But he's one of us. After going to the front and seeing our troops, he has changed. He knows all the land in this village better than anyone else. He can tell us which land is wet and which dry; which is good, wet or dry; how much each plot can yield in a good year; which land was flooded and in what year."

Once again the peasants were confronted with a problem they could not solve. Could they elect a middle peasant to the land-distribution committee? Many eyes were turned on Hsiao. The latter rose and spoke:

"It depends upon whether a middle peasant is willing to give up his present land to be redivided."

Liu Teh-shan responded:

"All right."

Old Chu asked:

"You only say 'all right.' But are you really willing?"

Liu fell silent. Knowing that he was not really willing, Hsiao said:

"We'll talk about it later."

The peasants went on to discuss the distribution of land the previous year. Hsiao referred to a landlord at random:

"Tell me, has Snatcher Tang surrendered all his land holdings?"

Liu Teh-shan, who knew just how much the landlords owned, asked:

"How much has he surrendered?"

Kuo answered:

"Nine hundred and sixty *mou* altogether."

Liu shook his head:

"He had more than that." He paused to do a sum in his head, then went on: "He had about one thousand two hundred *mou*."

Hsiao interrupted him to ask:

"You think he has held some back?"

Liu answered:

"Yes, he must be keeping some of it dark."

Hsiao suggested that they discuss this question of "land kept dark." Liu Kuei-lan rose and said:

"No wonder it took me so long to weed every ridge of his fields last year!"

Hsiao asked in surprise:

"Do you mean to say that last year he still hired people to weed his fields?"

Liu Kuei-lan replied:

"Why, yes. Every ridge was such a long ridge, and every *mou* was such a large *mou*! It took me more than three days to finish weeding ten *mou*. If anybody tells me now that he's not keeping some land dark, I refuse to believe it."

Mrs. Pai said that she had been to weed Goodman Tu's fields and had also been surprised at the length of every ridge and the extent of every *mou*. Other women who had done short-term labour and weeding for landlords rose one after another to recount similar experiences. So, it was proved beyond a doubt that the landlords were holding back more land than they were entitled to and that they were still exploiting the labour of peasant women. The village officers admitted that owing to lack of experience and ignorance of the real situation they had mismanaged the distribution of land.

After the confiscation of Han Number Six's land, other landlords had surrendered a few distant or bad plots, but they had kept many good pieces of land near the village. In addition, they had contrived to conceal some of their acreage. So, landlords remained landlords, some secretly renting out their spare land and growing fat on the rent, some hiring short-term labourers and exploiting their labour.

Some of the poor and hired peasants had not dared to accept land confiscated from landlords, while those who did take land received for the most part bad, distant, small or scattered plots. Old Tien was given ten *mou* in two small pieces, one barren hillside outside the West Gate, and one good piece on the north bank of the muddy river outside the North Gate. He had to wade through the water each time he took manure to the field or carried grain home. Old Sun had been too chicken-hearted to ask for land, although he did not say he did not want any. He accepted what he was given, but did not take good care of it and did not get enough out of it to live on. Now Team Leader Hsiao asked him:

"How about your land?"

He answered glibly:

"Very good. Whatever is sown grows."

Now, Chang Ching-shui also complained:

"I was given two plots of land, the nearer one being two miles away. I can't go and work on it every day. It yields nothing but weeds."

Hsiao conferred with Kuo and agreed that more meetings should be held to thresh out this problem of land redistribution. The situation being more encouraging this year, every peasant was eager to have land. All the villagers were even more interested in the land division than in the distribution of horses, clothes and implements. Everybody spoke up, and nobody yielded to anybody else. The majority were in favour of having all land surrendered and redistributed on a fairer basis. In accordance with the *Outline of Agrarian Law*, landlords were to surrender all their land and then to receive an appropriate share. In theory, middle peasants' land was not to be touched; but this point was now hotly debated by the Yuanmao villagers. Some said that without touching the land of middle peasants it would be extremely difficult to implement the redistribution of the land. The best arrangement would be to pool the land of middle peasants and then, in the redistribution, to compensate them with equally good land situated elsewhere if necessary. If a middle peasant gave up a plot so fertile that it need not be manured, he should be given another plot just as good. And, by this means, the redistribution could be done on as fair a basis as possible. Hsiao cast a glance at Liu Teh-shan, who was hanging his head, silent. Old Chu asked Liu loudly:

"Old Liu, what do you say to having your land pooled and redivided?"

Hsiao added:

"If you've any difficulty, or if you're not willing—don't be afraid to say so."

Liu said slowly:

"Since Team Leader Hsiao has asked me to speak, I will. I've a small crescent-shaped plot of land which was won by my father with the sweat of his brow. Having tilled it for many years, I know it well. On the south side are the graves of my grandparents and parents. They lie so near to where I work that it's easy in the spring to sweep their graves and offer sacrifice. It is all so convenient. . . ."

With a red face, Old Chu cut him short:

"That's a feudalistic way of talking. Land for land, you wouldn't lose out; yet you're still not willing. To hell with you!"

Liu glanced sidewise at Hsiao and Kuo, and felt that he need not be afraid of Old Chu. He retorted:

"I am a member of the Peasants' Association too. Who are you that you tell me to go to hell?"

Crimson in the face, his neck bulging, Old Chu jumped up and bellowed:

"What sort of peasant are you? Only recently let back into the Peasants' Association, you go swaggering about. One spell as a stretcher-bearer, and you put on such airs! 'I am a member of the Peasants' Association, too.' Who was it who hid in his hut last year?"

Stung on the raw, Liu Teh-shan forced a smile and answered in haste:

"It's true I hid in the hut. I'm ashamed to admit it. But, I'm different now. Team Leader Hsiao says all peasants are one family, bones and flesh together. That's why I've my say here. If you don't like it, I'll keep my mouth shut. If you don't want me here, I'll go."

Old Chu barred his way, saying:

"You needn't go. I'll go."

Confusion ensued. Some sympathized with Liu, some supported Old Chu. In the babel, it was impossible to hear clearly. Kuo stood up and shouted:

"Neither of you is to leave the meeting. Now, everybody, be quiet, please. Team Leader Hsiao has something to say."

Old Sun stood up too, and chimed in:

"If any one makes any more noise, he's a relative of a bad egg, kin to a cuckold and brother-in-law of Han Number Six!"

Silence suddenly fell, not because of Old Sun's threat, but because Hsiao had stood up on a bench, and was calling for attention:

"Friends and comrades, listen to me! It is the policy of the Communist Party and a principle laid down by Chairman Mao that farmhands and poor and middle peasants should unite as closely as flesh and bones. We fight together, rule together, and together take the path of new democracy. If Liu doesn't like to pool his land, let him keep it. But he knows all the land in this

village and can use the abacus—we should welcome him to join in measuring the land.” Hsiao paused to clap his hands and the villagers followed suit. He went on: “We’ll adjourn the meeting for the time being.” He omitted to say anything about Old Chu, who was still scowling. Team Leader Hsiao asked Old Chu to stay behind for a while, however; and they talked about the land reform policy late into the night.

The next day, spring snow fell. Four groups of surveyors were out in the fields, every group composed of two men carrying a cord to measure the area, one carrying a stick to serve as a ruler, one to ascertain the boundaries, one to make a note of the measurements, and one to calculate on the abacus. The wind soughed in the trees, and the men plodded, ankle-deep, through the snow, numb with cold, their frozen hands in their sleeves. But they carried on, persistently. And each group was followed by a small crowd. Old Tien and Old Sun looked more energetic than the youngsters. Old Tien said:

“This is a serious matter: there must be no mistakes. Let’s all see that nobody should be selfish. This time it’s not like last year. Now, we’re all settling down to peaceful work and life; we’re sowing the seed of prosperity. Last year, when we let them measure the land for us, those fellows like Little Yang and Chang Fu-ying had their own axes to grind, so they bungled the job. We ourselves were to blame, though, for taking what they gave us. This time, we must watch over everything ourselves.”

Two men were holding an iron wire, one at each end, to measure the side of a plot of land, when a blast of wind blew the wire slightly to one side. Immediately, Old Sun shouted:

“Take care! Mind you pull the wire straight! A little to one side will make two ridges’ difference.”

It took five days to measure all the land. Another five days, and everybody received his or her share. The distribution was much more carefully made than the previous time. The recipients were graded, not the lands. If several people wanted the same plot, the villagers decided which of them deserved it most. If only one man wanted a plot, it was given him. For example, three peasants applied for some fields which had belonged to Han Number Six—rich, flat fields lying just outside the South Gate. A dispute arose. A comparison followed—a comparison of living conditions, of per-

sonal histories, of financial conditions and of merits. It became clear, then, which of the three applicants deserved the land most, and it was given him. This method had its drawbacks, however, because selfish fellows tended to bicker and quibble endlessly. In the midst of all the noise and haggling, Kuo sat silent, bending his head and puffing at his pipe. Old Sun, who had long considered himself one of Kuo's closest friends, always took it upon himself to protect his interests. He went up to Kuo, advised him in an undertone:

"Chairman Kuo, what kind of land do you want? You must speak up, if you want to get good land. If you get bad land, how can you marry and have children?"

Kuo did not answer him. His attitude was different. He was responsible for the work in the village, and his main concern was to see that things were properly done. If every villager got a piece of land he liked, Kuo himself would be quite satisfied. If all the villagers were doing well, he would be doing well too. He was a Communist; and Team Leader Hsiao had told him that Communists should put public affairs first and personal interests last. He believed that that was the right thing to do: he had given little thought to his own interests and had always considered the village's affairs as his own. Old Sun, on the other hand, had his eye on a rich plot of land outside the South Gate. He knew he had no chance of getting it—Old Chu and Chang Ching-shui would never let him have it—but rather than let it fall into the hands of a stranger, he would put Kuo on its track. Kuo was his close friend, and a generous fellow. If he helped Kuo to get that good piece of land, then, later on, if he asked for a few corn-cobs to take home, Kuo surely wouldn't object. Accordingly, he jumped onto the *kang* and declared at the top of his voice:

"Quiet, everybody! Chairman Kuo wants a piece of land!"

Everybody was quiet, waiting for Kuo to announce which plot he wanted. An old man said:

"Let him choose first. He's worked harder and done more for our village than anyone else."

Kuo was silent, sucking at his pipe. Old Sun made haste to speak for him:

"He wants that land outside the South Gate—the plot that belonged to Han Number Six."

Still seated, Kuo said:

"Don't listen to him. The rest of you choose first."

But the villagers agreed with Old Sun and were all for giving ten *mou* of that good land to Kuo. Kuo remembered how he had sweated over this land when he was working for Han Number Six. If he tilled this plot well, it would yield at least ten piculs of golden maize every year. After the tax in kind, what was left would be more than enough for a couple to live on. He knew that in asking him to take that good land the villagers were expressing their good will. Every peasant was entitled to five *mou*, but he, being a bachelor, had the right to ten *mou* for himself and his future wife. So, he decided to accept this kind offer. In thanking the villagers, he pledged himself to work harder than ever for the public cause.

Everybody was given land that he liked. Old Tien was all smiles, as he said: "From now on, there's hope for me." Old Sun declared that he was going to plant one-third of the land given him to hay with which to feed his horses. Fat and strong, his horses would go up the hills in winter and haul down logs and fuel without delay or mishap. Big Li, the village blacksmith, was working day and night at his furnace, repairing ploughs and making hoes for the big production campaign the coming spring. As the peasants staked off the boundaries of their newly-acquired farms, spring snow fluttered down, settling on the roofs, courtyards and window-ledge. All was still in the Peasants' Association, and Hsiao was left alone in his room, happy and light-hearted after the successful redivision of the land. Sitting at the square table, he took out his notebook and fountain-pen, and began to write happily yet solemnly:

To do away with feudalism, we have to wipe out the landlord economy which has for thousands of years impeded the development of production in our country. The landlords go, and the peasants have their own land. The first step in the solution of our land problem has laid the foundation for our economic development. The emancipated peasants, under the leadership of the Communist Party, will go forward and never lag behind. Stalin says: "Those who fall behind get beaten." For the last one hundred years, our history has been a series of beatings inflicted upon us. For one hundred years, our revolutionary pioneers have fought and died to end that history. Now

a new day is dawning for China under the able leadership of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party headed by Chairman Mao Tse-tung.

As he wrote, he felt his eyes flooding. Hsiao was a brave and resolute fellow. Once, while he was away from home on revolutionary work, he heard that his mother was dying for lack of money to pay for proper medical treatment. He shed no tears then. Now, however, he felt like crying—not for sorrow, but for the joy and gratitude he felt at being able to devote himself to the revolution and the service of the masses.

XXVI

ON March 21, the spring snow had ceased. After Team Leader Hsiao, Kuo Chuan-hai, Li Chang-yu and the others had summarized their experience in the recent distribution of land, Hsiao set out on horseback one evening with Wan for the county seat, to attend a meeting of district Party secretaries in preparation for a conference of county Party secretaries to be held some time in April.

All the lands had been staked off. The members of the women's literacy class were giving a lead to all village women in plaiting baskets and crates, in selecting seeds for spring sowing, and in doing needlework they would have no time for when the busy season arrived. The men were busy collecting and spreading manure, tending their draught animals, repairing implements and gathering a year's supply of fuel and firewood. The compost heaps in the village dwindled and then vanished, while in every courtyard rose stacks of black fuel and mounds of yellowish firewood.

A thaw set in as the weather became warmer. The spring snow melted as soon as it touched the ground and turned to slush. The roads were no longer as dry and clean as before. People were anxious to know how, this year, the Sungari River was melting. Old Sun, back from a sale of firewood in the county town, told them:

"This year, the river is melting gently, not roughly. Rough melting means blocks of ice come floating down the river, while gentle melting means the ice melts from below. This year, the thaw has set in early, and that means a good year ahead."



Everybody was given land that he liked.



All the villagers were in a festive mood, humming tunes as they went about their work. Scarcely a week passed without a wedding: the trumpets heralding a marriage were constantly heard.

Kuo had moved into the new rooms allotted to him in what had once been one of Goodman Tu's houses. Kuo had three rooms all to himself, snug and clean, with a little courtyard. Old Tien occupied the west wing. The old man had chosen to move into this smaller place from the larger rooms in the Peasants' Association out of a desire to cut down fuel expenses in winter. Kuo's three rooms in the east wing were to be his new home; for he was going to marry Liu Kuei-lan. All the villagers were talking about this coming event; and a group sunning themselves under the eaves of Big Li's house said:

"It's match of dragon with phoenix."

"They'll be a happy couple, without in-laws."

"They say Old Sun is the match-maker."

"Look! Here the old fellow comes."

As soon as Old Sun came up, they gathered round him. An old man asked:

"Will there be a pig 'opening the wedlock'?"¹

Old Sun answered:

"There won't be any pig. Chairman Kuo doesn't believe in that sort of thing. He won't even fix up a shrine to the god of marriage by the west wall." Seeing that they were listening with interest, Old Sun waxed more eloquent. "Every man must go through this ceremony. Thirty years ago, when I was married, my mother-in-law insisted upon a 'wedlock-opening' pig; but how could a poor fellow like me find a fat porker? I sent her a piglet, and two *sheng* of yellow rice, one *sheng* of soya bean, and one bottle of white wine. At the sight of the piglet, my mother-in-law scolded the match-maker: 'You said we'd get two porkers and two bottles of wine; but now only this. What sort of match-maker do you call yourself? What do you think you're up to? Where were you dragged up? Were you born just to cheat people?' The match-maker turned tail

¹ It is an old custom of Manchu origin to write the name of a new-born baby girl on a piece of red cloth and enshrine it on the wall. It remains there until the girl's wedding day when it is taken down at a ceremony called "opening the wedlock." On this occasion, one or two pigs sent by the bridegroom are sacrificed to the god of marriage.

and fled, without waiting for the dinner to which she was entitled. My mother-in-law thought that piglet was really too small, so she fetched a big, fat pig from her pigsty and made it stand facing the west wall; then she got my old woman to kneel down there and kowtow three times. They poured wine on the ears of the pig, saying that if the animal pricked its ears we would live in harmony and happiness but that if it shook its head that would mean bad luck. And what do you suppose that pig did? It pricked its ears and then shook its head—two omens at the same time!"

Big Li put in:

"Then, you two had both good luck and bad luck?"

Old Sun agreed:

"That's right. Out of twenty-nine years as a carter, I had twenty-eight years of poverty and misery. Then, the Communists came, and my good luck came! So, I had bad luck to begin with. Now, I've got a new house, a horse, a cart and clothes; and they made me a member of the land-distribution committee. Things aren't going badly at all!"

Big Li laughed and said sarcastically:

"You're quite right. That was a wise pig to be able to tell your fortune for thirty years ahead. Listen! There goes the trumpet. Let's go to Kuo's wedding."

Old Sun said:

"You people go first. I must go home to change my clothes." Guests began to arrive at Kuo's house, until the little yard was filled to overflowing. Activists of the Peasants' Association and of the Women's Association came with relatives and friends of the Kuo and Liu families to offer their congratulations. Old Tien was the busiest of men, boiling water, pouring tea, handing round tobacco and acting as usher. He greeted every arrival with a smile, saying:

"Come on in, please."

As he hurried in and out of the rooms, he looked as happy as if it was his own son getting married. Two musicians set a table outside the entrance gate, sat down and began blowing away, one on a clarion, the other on a flute. In the kitchen, three cooks were chopping, frying, grilling and braising, the steamy aroma escaping through the kitchen windows and doors, and floating up wave after wave to melt the icicles hanging from the eaves. Over the lintel of

the door was pasted a big character HAPPINESS clipped out of red paper, while both sides of the door were decorated with a couplet written in dignified, block characters, wishing the couple a harmonious and joyful life. It was the calligraphy of the smallpox physician.

After the midday meal, when the two match-makers, ushers and musicians set out in a big cart to fetch the bride, the yard of Kuo's house became quiet. At dusk, the bride left the house of Mrs. Pai, sitting demurely in the middle of a rubber-wheeled cart drawn by three horses. She was wearing a red padded jacket, blue satin padded trousers and red satin flower-patterned shoes, and she had a red velvet flower in her hair. Following the bridal cart was a cart loaded with the flutists, match-makers and ushers. The halters of the horses and the whip of the carter were also decorated with strips of red cloth.

It was after sunset when the bridal cart reached Kuo's house. As it drew up in front of the entrance gate, men, women and children formed a circle round it to gaze at the bride in red—they could hardly recognize Liu Kuei-lan. She was blushing and bending her head. Her red jacket had been allotted her out of the confiscated articles. It had been too big, but she had spent a whole night altering it, and now it fitted her very well. The women commented on her looks and dress:

"Big eyes, long eyebrows and an oval face."

"Her face is rouged."

"No, it isn't rouge. It's the reflection of the red jacket."

"No, it's not. She is blushing."

"A dress is to a bride what a saddle is to a horse. In this dress, she's the best-looking girl in the village."

Listening to such comments, Liu Kuei-lan bent her head in silence. Her feet were numb with cold in her thin bridal shoes, and she was eager to get off the cart and stretch them. But Chang Ching-shui stopped her, saying jokingly:

"Don't be in such a hurry! Control yourself."

Old Sun's wife wanted the bride to drink a cup of water. When Liu Kuei-lan shook her head, the old lady said:

"Do take a sip. This is sugared water. It will sweeten your lips."

Liu Kuei-lan asked, blushing:

"Why should my lips be sweetened?"

Mrs. Sun answered:

"Drink the water and don't ask questions. It's an old rule: every bride has to drink."

A young woman pushed the cup to the bride's lips, and Liu Kuei-lan took a sip. Dazed with happiness, she was in a dream, walking on air, and she let herself be managed. Her legs were benumbed up to the knees, and she was longing to get off the cart and go into the kitchen to warm herself. Just then, however, another young woman presented a basin and asked her to wash her hands; and Mrs. Sun said:

"Wash your hands, and you won't break bowls."

Liu Kuei-lan dipped her hands in the warm water and then wiped them on a dry towel. She was about to get off the cart to stretch her frozen legs, when a third young woman came up, carrying a brazier filled with burning charcoal. At last, the bride thought she could warm her icy feet; but the woman who had brought the brazier told her it was meant for her hands.

Mrs. Sun said:

"Warm your hands over the fire, and you will be warm-hearted to your guests."

Liu Kuei-lan did as she was told, and then was rising to get off the cart, when Mrs. Sun warned her:

"Don't set foot on the ground. Step on the rushes."

All the way from the gate, across the yard, into the room, up to the *kang*, lay a bridal path of mats and rushes. Liu Kuei-lan alighted and was walking slowly over the rushes, when she heard somebody exclaim:

"Here comes Chairman Kuo."

Liu Kuei-lan's face lit up, and she felt a strange warmth welling up in her heart as she cast a sidelong glance at him. She knew how Kuo looked to the last hair on his eyebrows, but today he was transformed. He was wearing a blue woollen gown and a grey felt hat, which Old Sun had borrowed for him. Across his chest were tied two bands of red and green satin. He was blushing to the tips of his ears. The children cried out:

"Look! How red his face is! He's shyer than the bride."

The band struck up, and the ushers led bridegroom and bride to the altar, which was formed of three low-legged *kang*-tables one on top of the other. On this altar were burning two red candles,

the bright flames flickering in the cold evening breeze. There were five red flower-patterned bowls filled to the brim with delicacies: pig's liver, pig's heart, stewed cabbage, bean vermicelli and steamed fish. The five bowls were arranged in the pattern of a plum blossom, a big red paper-flower stuck in each. A stick of incense and the rod of a steelyard had been stuck in a *tou* measure filled to the brim with kaoliang. Bridegroom and bride took their place behind the altar, facing the entrance gate. The women guests formed a semi-circle by the young couple, looking over each other's shoulders sometimes at the bridegroom but mostly at the bride.

They kept up a running commentary.

"Look at the flower-patterns on her shoes!"

"How well her red jacket fits!"

"This red jacket belonged to Goodman Tu's youngest daughter-in-law. At first, it was too large for Liu Kuei-lan, but she cut it down."

"She's a good needlewoman!"

"I know. She's one of the finest workers in the village."

"And she's good at clipping paper cuts for the windows."

The bride heard all these personal remarks, but hung her head and kept silent. In the ordinary way, she would have protested: "No, you're mistaken. Mrs. Pai cuts better paper patterns than I." The women continued to talk:

"The old folk say that unless a bride is dressed in red to kowtow to heaven and earth, she will be unhappy all her life."

"It's true. I remember when I got married I couldn't afford a red jacket: I had to borrow one from the wife of a landlord, and it was a long time before she would let me have it. In those days, poor people met difficulties at every turn."

"Today, poor people have no more difficulties. Mrs. Wang's elder son was hard pressed by his mother-in-law for a flower-patterned quilt as a wedding gift. Mrs. Wang couldn't afford one, and she couldn't sleep for worry. It looked as if the match would be broken off, when the Peasants' Association sent her a quilt; and now she's got her daughter-in-law."

Somebody suggested that, since it was so cold, the ceremony of kowtowing to heaven and earth should take place at once. Somebody else said that it was still too early and the new couple must wait. A third gave warning that if they waited any longer the

bride's feet would freeze. Old Sun also said: "The earlier the bridegroom and bride kowtow to heaven and earth, the earlier they will have a son." Then the trumpet and the flute sounded, and the ceremony began.

After the ceremony, Kuo Chuan-hai and Liu Kuei-lan walked side by side over the rushes towards the room. Several young women ran ahead of them and stopped before the door, waiting for them to approach. They giggled as they said:

"Let's see which foot she sets first in the room!"

"Why?"

"If it's the right foot, she will have a girl; if it's the left foot, she will have a boy."

When the bridegroom and bride were approaching the door, Old Sun's wife ran up and cried:

"The bride mustn't step on the gutter! If she does, her husband won't prosper."

Either because she was numb with cold or too flustered to hear all these alarms, the bride just sailed straight into the room. All the young women exclaimed:

"Left foot! Left foot in first! A boy coming!"

The young couple walked into the bridal chamber in a daze. Mrs. Sun hastily threw a sack filled with kaoliang in their path before the *kang*, and called:

"Let the bridegroom step over the kaoliang onto the *kang*!" She pointed at the sack and continued: "Step on this, and you will get more prosperous every year." Somebody lowered the scarlet flower-patterned satin curtain, and the bridegroom and the bride sat on the *kang* cross-legged behind the curtain. A young woman began to comb the bride's hair. There were six other young women also sitting on the *kang*, all mothers with infants in their arms. They neither spoke nor smiled. The bride felt warmth coming back to her feet. At the thought of the ceremony imposed by Mrs. Sun, she burst out laughing. Neither she nor her husband believed in such customs, but Mrs. Sun had insisted:

"No ceremony? Then, it's no wedding."

What next? The bride thought: "Let them do what they like." She was too bewildered to resist.

The bridal chamber had been decked out by Mrs. Chao. A big kerosene lamp was hanging from the ceiling, and a pair of

red candles were burning brightly on the square table, on which had been set a porcelain teapot and tea cups, all covered with red paper flower-patterns. On the wall, in the place of the old ancestral shrine, were three big pictures of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, Commander-in-Chief Chu Teh, and General Lin Piao. The wall above the *kang* was posted with two red paper scrolls inscribed with "Live a Harmonious Life" and "Stick to the Revolution"; there were also two smaller slips of red paper on which were written "Congratulations to Kuo Chuan-hai and Liu Kuei-lan" and "Best Wishes from Hsiao Hsiang."

The nuptial chamber and all the rooms were swarming with merry guests. After the flutists had played a tune, the bridesmaids came in with two cups of wine, one for the bridegroom and one for the bride: they had to drink and then to exchange cups, while the flutists were playing the tune of the wine drinking ceremony. All the children crowded round the newly-weds, gazing at them, refusing to disperse. Old Chu was trying to reach something, but the children stood in his way. He cried out:

"All children go home and go to bed. It's getting very late."

Old Sun supported Old Chu:

"You'll all have a day like this later, sons. What's the hurry now?"

The children laughed, but refused to move. Kuo got off the *kang*, to act as host at the wedding feast. The women guests were in the west room, where Mrs. Tien and Mrs. Chao were entertaining them.

Mrs. Tien said:

"Everything is simpler nowadays. Formerly, marriage was so expensive, lots of poor men couldn't afford it. Before you got your wife, you had first to give eight pigs—a pig for every festival, a pig for the New Year, and a pig to open the wedlock. Some families even demanded two pigs to open the wedlock and two bottles of wine, not to mention wedding clothes and other presents. Where could a poor man get all these things from?"

Mrs. Chao agreed:

"Now, none of those things are needed. It's much better."

Mrs. Sun disagreed with both Mrs. Tien and Mrs. Chao:

"A little ceremony's needed. Otherwise, it doesn't look like a wedding."

Mrs. Chao said:

"The new custom is for the man and the girl to know and like each other. It's not like in our time, when the two had never even met. If they suited each other, well and good. If not, they would suffer all their lives."

Mrs. Sun agreed with Mrs. Chao on this point:

"Yes, it's good, knowing and liking each other beforehand. It saves a lot of trouble afterwards. Today, the girl has a chance to find out how her future husband looks and behaves before she makes up her mind. It's easier for the match-maker, too."

Young women and old women carried on the animated conversation:

"Today, boy and girl get to know each other before they marry, they can even work together as colleagues before they become husband and wife."

"Even if a girl hasn't the chance to see the man, she can at least make inquiries about him."

"In our day, it would have been a scandal if any girl had tried to find out what a man was like."

"What if she married a cripple, an imbecile or a loafer?"

"That would be fate."

"In the past, most women didn't use their brains. They married to get a home, and they had to obey their in-laws and put up with being beaten or cursed. Now, anyone who bullies a married woman will find a deputation from the Women's Association at his door."

"There used to be child-wives. . . ."

Before this speaker had finished, Mrs. Sun winked at her to be quiet. The old lady said in a whisper:

"Our bride had been a child-wife."

All the young women started whispering:

"Then, does this count as her first marriage or her second?"

"The first. She never put up her hair."

"Otherwise, how could Kuo have set his cap at her? He's never touched a woman."

The men guests were in the west room of the house of a neighbour, Chang. They were cracking sunflower seeds and chatting. Old Sun and Old Chu had ceased to be match-makers after the bride had entered the house; so, Old Sun now had leisure to

return to his wedlock-opening pig. And he repeated much of what he had said to others.

Old Chu chimed in:

"Last year, you told me that you had had nothing but bad luck and that you were destined to be poor."

Old Sun hurried to answer:

"Last year was last year, and this year is this year. You think every year is like every other year? You think that every year all the old and young sparrows live in the same nest? In the past, if you hadn't two porkers, you must at least send one; if you hadn't a porker, you must at least send a piglet. This year, Liu Kuei-lan doesn't ask for anything and she brings with her five *mou* of land. Everything is changed. Fate is changed. Man is changed."

Old Tien nodded and said with a laugh:

"That's where a revolution comes in useful. Now all poor men have wives, and it's the turn of bad eggs and idlers to remain unmarried."

Old Sun, narrowing his left eye into a merry slit, said:

"If not for that old woman of mine, I could marry a wife with a piece of land!"

Old Chu roared:

"Let Mrs. Sun hear this! Fetch her quick."

Suddenly the trumpets and flutes sounded once more. All the guests crowded out to watch the bride meeting elder and younger members of the family, greeting relatives and friends, and then eating dumplings to wish herself many children and children's children. The festivities continued until the cock crowed for the third time and the eastern sky turned red.

XXVII

A COUPLE of weeks later, Team Leader Hsiao came back to Yuanmao with Wan. He had an important job and had come back to this village to get some experience which would be of use elsewhere. The moment he saw Kuo Chuan-hai, who was chairman of the Peasants' Association and local Party secretary, he greeted him, smiling:

"Congratulations on your marriage! I'm sorry I couldn't come to your wedding." Then he asked jokingly:

"How are you getting along with your bride? Does she stay at home all the time? Is she no longer interested in her work outside?"

Kuo answered blushing:

"Oh, no. She's leading the women in plaiting straw-hats. Last year, quite a few fields here were flooded, so we didn't produce enough to tide over till the spring sowing. There is a slight shortage of food and fodder. So, we're calling upon the women to work on some side lines and we'll exchange our products for food and fodder in the neighbouring villages."

Hsiao cut him short:

"We can leave this subject for the moment. The food shortage isn't serious, and the government will help, too. I've come to consult you about something more urgent. We've got a pretty good record of work for our county, and especially our district and village. Yuanmao distinguished itself in the fight against the bandits the year before last and in the search for landlords' hidden assets. The 'house-cleaning' didn't go badly either. The only mistake was the infringement of the rights of the middle peasants, but this mistake was made all over the northern parts too, and we weren't slow to correct it. There's one thing, though, in which we're really lagging behind. Guess what it is."

Kuo pulled out of his waist-band the stemmed pipe with the blue jade bowl that had belonged to Chao Yu-lin, stuffed tobacco into the bowl, went into the outer room, squatted before the stove and poked the cinders for a light. He knew what was the matter with his village, but he said nothing. He lighted the pipe, waited a while and then remarked:

"Only a handful of men have joined the army."

Hsiao said with a smile:

"That's it. What shall we do now?"

"What's the quota for this village, this time?"

"How many soldiers' families are there in this village?"

"Thirty-nine."

"Not too few. But, at present, fighting is between large army corps, and we need a great number of men. If, this time, as many Yuanmao men join up as have already enlisted, then we'll be able

to catch up with the other villages. Changling District in Hulan County bungled the 'house-cleaning' but they had plenty of men joining the army. In that one district about a thousand young men applied in one week. After a careful selection, a battalion was formed and named 'The Reserve Battalion of Changling.' What a glorious name!"

Kuo sat on the edge of the *kang*, bending his head in thought, puffing at his pipe. Hsiao drew nearer and asked:

"Are there any difficulties?"

Kuo answered:

"Yes." He puffed at his pipe once more and went on: "It isn't a great difficulty, though. Now that the men have houses, land and livestock of their own, they don't like to leave them."

Hsiao answered:

"We must find a way out of the difficulty. You go and get several people to come for a talk, and then we'll have a bigger meeting. They found in Hulan that family meetings helped: the wife urged her husband, the father his sons, the younger brother his elder brother."

Kuo rose to go, then turned back and said:

"Chang Ching-shui, Mrs. Pai and Mrs. Chao have asked to be admitted to the Party."

Hsiao asked:

"Have you discussed this in your small group? Do the applicants understand what they want and what's wanted of them?"

"Yes. While Pai was home for the New Year holiday, he told his wife about the Communist Party and what it meant to be a member."

Hsiao asked:

"How does she look at it now?"

"She says that the Communist Party aims to help all the people in the whole country to better themselves, so that everybody can live a happy life in future. Communists don't just care about their own private affairs. She understands this principle and wishes to join the Party and to go all out to do revolutionary work."

"What about Chang Ching-shui and Mrs. Chao?"

"Chang Ching-shui says without the Communist Party there would be no New China—without the Communist Party, the people

of Yuanmao could never have stood up. Without joining the Party, an individual can't do much. Therefore, he wishes to be a Communist, to follow Chairman Mao forever, and never to fear anything. Mrs. Chao says: 'My husband was a Communist. If I don't learn from him, not to shirk difficulties, not to fear death, but to serve others whole-heartedly, I shall be letting him down.'

Hsiao said:

"I'll have a talk with each of them, later on."

Kuo said:

"There's someone else, too, who would like to join the Party."

Hsiao guessed who it was, but asked with a smile:

"Who is it?"

"Liu Kuei-lan."

Hsiao nodded, beaming. He knew it was characteristic of Chinese villages that if there was one revolutionary in the family all the other members of the household would want to do the same thing. Liu Kuei-lan had suffered a great deal as a girl and was now an enlightened, strong and able activist. He did not ask any more, but said:

"After we have seen to the recruiting, we must build up and consolidate the Party. I'll have a good talk with each of those applicants. For the moment, you had better call Big Li and the others to a small group meeting to prepare for a conference of the activists."

After the activists had met, the movement for joining the army was under way. Big gatherings, small gatherings and family gatherings went on day and night all over the village. Three days had passed, but only three villagers had applied. One was a Communist, Big Li, who had lately come back from the stretcher unit at the front. One was Chang Ching-shui, who had recently signified his desire to join the Party. One was Old Chu now going on for forty, who was sure to be rejected. Chang Ching-shui's brother was already in the army, and his mother came to the Peasants' Association to ask Team Leader Hsiao to let Chang Ching-shui stay at home on the plea that his father was old and bed-ridden and there was no other able-bodied man in the house. Hsiao had banked on Yuanmao being a model village in this movement and setting an example for the whole county. It looked now as if his plan was doomed to failure. That day, the sky was overcast, with

the sun breaking through now and then; but the wind was no longer a piercing blast that numbed your face. As Hsiao strolled through the southern outskirts of the village, he saw tender green showing through the black puddles of melted snow. Some wild vegetables were sprouting; and among a group of children uprooting wild vegetables, was So-chu, Mrs. Chao's son. Hsiao called the boy to him, took him up in his arms and asked:

"What are you doing here?"

"Mummy told me to get some vegetables for stuffing."

Just as Hsiao put the boy down, the sun disappeared behind the clouds, and So-chu sang:

Sun, sun, come out now:

I'll go up the hill and bow.

"If you sing this song," said So-chu, "the sun will come out." But although he sang for a long time, the sun refused to reappear. Hsiao told him jokingly:

"So-chu, your magic doesn't work!"

The little boy laughed and took to his heels. A few minutes later, Hsiao was back in the village walking along the main road. He met carts carrying manure to the fields, and carts coming back from the hills loaded high with fuel. Pale kitchen smoke was curling up from the yellow thatches where the snow had melted. In a small courtyard near the South Gate a youngster in a long fur gown was standing beside a trough, stirring the hay and mash with a stick. The brown horse tied to a pole nearby was sleek and strong. The youngster was watching it so raptly that he did not see Hsiao, and Hsiao did not interrupt him. In another courtyard, a bride in red, wearing a velvet flower in her short hair, was chopping firewood. Hsiao did not disturb her. He passed by several other houses, where men and women were plaiting mats, scything hay, walking horses or feeding pigs. The signs of a peaceful and happy life were everywhere in evidence. It seemed as if the villagers had forgotten about the war.

In the evening, Hsiao called the officers of the Peasants' Association for a consultation, after which a mass meeting was held, at which members of army-men's families spoke. Kuo also spoke:

"The world belongs to us farmhands and poor and middle peasants now; and we must protect what we have won. Chiang Kai-shek has not been knocked out yet. If we just settle down

to a peaceful life, the reactionaries will come back, and what shall we do then?"

The villagers were silent. Mrs. Pai stood up and declared:

"If I were a man, I would have joined up long ago. To think that a man should stay idle at home! For shame!"

A youngster said:

"If all go to the front, who will till the fields?"

Mrs. Pai answered:

"Go, and we women will farm for you. Not a single ridge will be neglected."

Mrs. Tien also said:

"We old folks can still feed pigs and chickens and work at side lines to help keep the family going."

The little swineherd Wu said:

"We youngsters can organize ourselves too. We can mow and weed, fetch water and chop wood; and two of us can do the work of one man."

Sitting in the corner, Kuo was silent, puffing at his pipe and bending his head. After the meeting was over, five more peasants applied: one of them had arthritis, but the other four were sturdy youngsters. The quota being forty, however, the small number of seven or eight fell far short; and Hsiao called another meeting of activists to discuss why there was still no enthusiasm to enlist. He told everybody to think up ways to remedy this before the next big meeting the following day.

At midnight, Liu Kuei-lan came to the Peasants' Association to look for her husband. Hsiao got up, struck a match, lighted the lamp, took a look at the bride in her red padded jacket and said:

"He left here long ago. . . . He hasn't gone home yet? Maybe, he's in Big Li's place. Go and see if he's there. Don't worry—he can't be missing."

Liu Kuei-lan went on to Big Li's house. The doors of all the houses she passed were bolted and the windows were dark. Every courtyard was quiet. She arrived at Big Li's smithy and found it closed, dark and quiet like the other houses. She called out:

"Big Li! Have you seen Kuo Chuan-hai?"

After she had called out several times, Big Li stirred on his *kang* and answered:

"No! Is that Liu Kuei-lan? What's the matter? Is your husband missing?"

She was very worried, yet there was nothing she could do but go home to see if he had come back while she was out.

In the meantime, Kuo was in the house of Mrs. Wang, joining in the family conference. The old lady had two sons, and Kuo thought it might be possible to persuade one of them to enlist. Mrs. Wang sat silent to begin with, while Kuo urged her to speak to her sons. Then she said:

"My second son is a shoe-maker with arthritis. Even if he volunteered, they wouldn't have him. My first son is a bridegroom like yourself." She paused and glanced at Kuo, who had suddenly blushed. She went on:

"Ai! When a young man is newly married—well, you know how it is. It's not easy, marrying a wife. I don't like to say anything."

The old lady chattered on. It was hard to know whether she was being sincere or sarcastic.

Kuo did not go home or to the Peasants' Association—he walked absent-mindedly to the schoolhouse, which, after the teachers had all gone to bed, was dark, quiet and empty. He sat upon a desk, toying with Chao Yu-lin's pipe. After his conversation with Mrs. Wang, he felt sure that he had discovered the hitch in the movement: everybody loved his home. He himself was not capable of setting an example for the others. He remembered Chao Yu-lin, who had died fighting for the people though he had a wife, too, and a child. He realized that he had lately lost the power of persuasion. Unwilling to leave his own home, he was urging other men to go to the front. They must all think him selfish though they did not say so. He seemed to see his wife coming in, smiling. "What do you want?" he demanded, and she answered: "You mustn't leave me. We've been married only twenty days." She cried, nestling her head in his lap and he felt his heart melting. Suddenly, with a crash, a tabby cat jumped down from a rafter on to a desk, overturning an ink-bottle, which rolled to the ground and broke to pieces. Kuo came to himself. He opened his eyes, but there was nobody there. He was alone in the dark and empty classroom. He put Chao Yu-lin's pipe into his mouth and said fiercely:

"You're forgetting you're a Communist. You can't bear to leave home. Now that you have a wife, you are turning away from the Party. You would rather stay with her than go to the front. You will let your wife hold you back until you end up like Hua Yung-hsi—cast out by the people."

He wiped his hot cheeks with his hand, jumped off the desk, and, without thinking any more, went to the Peasants' Association. Liu Kuei-lan had been there a few minutes before him, and Hsiao had not yet blown out the light. Hsiao called Kuo in and asked him, smiling:

"What's the matter with you and your wife? You went off, she came in. She went off, you came in. Where have you been?"

Kuo did not answer Hsiao's question. He sat down on the edge of the *kang*, still sucking his pipe which had gone out. Hsiao waited, knowing that he had something to say. After a while, Kuo said:

"I'm joining up."

Hsiao leaped off the *kang* and asked in surprise:

"You?"

Kuo removed the pipe from his mouth and answered calmly:

"Yes."

Hsiao said:

"Who's to do the work of the village?"

Kuo stood up and said:

"You may pick another man—either Big Li or Chang Ching-shui will do." With this, off he went. Hsiao called after him:

"Just a minute. Another word with you."

Kuo was already out of the courtyard. Hsiao ran to the entrance gate and called after him:

"Kuo Chuan-hai! Kuo Chuan-hai!"

The footfalls became more distant, and there was no reply. Hsiao returned to his room, but he did not lie down for a long time. He was deep in thought. Kuo was the best worker he had trained in this district during the last two years. He had a good background and was brave, intelligent, quick and upright. Hsiao had hoped to make a county Party secretary of him. It was hard to let him go. But in the next instant, Hsiao remembered how determined Kuo had looked when he told him that he was joining up. Hsiao blamed himself for wanting to keep a good man in

his own area so that his work might be well done, forgetting the over-all situation and the war. What had he been thinking of? He ridiculed himself:

"I'm like one of those backward village women, short-sighted and selfish. This concern only for one's own outfit is actually a form of individualism. I'm no better than a backward woman who sees no further than the scissors on her *kang*."

He lay down, closed his eyes, and, half asleep and half awake, continued to think: "He's right. Who? Kuo Chuan-hai is right. For the sake of the liberation of all China, we of the proletariat must send our best young men to the front. We of the Communist Party must send our best members to the front. He has been married scarcely twenty days—will Liu Kuei-lan cry? He is doing the right thing. But how is he going to explain it to his wife?" Another moment, and he was fast asleep.

XXVIII

LIU Kuei-lan was only just home when Kuo came back. She was sitting on the *kang* worrying about her husband in the light of the bean-oil lamp on the stand. She unbuttoned her red padded jacket, revealing rounded breasts under a white cotton blouse, and she was about to lie down, when she heard footfalls in the courtyard and immediately asked through the window: "Who's there?" Kuo opened the door and came in. Glancing at his wife, he said:

"Not asleep yet?"

Instead of answering his question, she asked:

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere." Thinking he might be cold, she drew the brazier nearer to him, and he poked the live charcoal, lighted his pipe and began smoking. Finding his wife in a happy mood, he could not break the news to her right away. Instead, he asked, holding his pipe in his hand:

"Have you fed the mare?"

She answered, smiling: "No. I had forgotten." Kuo took a puff at his pipe and rose to go out to feed the horse, when his wife said:

"Warm yourself before you feed your horse. Oh, you love that horse more than life itself!"

It was true that Kuo loved horses. He never could find it in his heart to whip a horse. Knowing that the mare was in foal, he took special care of her. However difficult it might be, he never omitted to feed her on bean-cakes, and, no matter how cold it was, he made a point of getting up in the middle of the night to give her hay. He said: "Without hay during the night, a horse won't grow fat." After the mare returned from work, sweating, he walked her around before watering her. Every day, he swept the open stable clean, and he had rigged up a mat awning as a shelter against rain and snow. As a result of his care, his horse was fat, sleek and spirited. Now that he was going to the front, he wanted to give her once more midnight feed, and stroke her neatly cropped mane. But she was not there in the open stable. He came nearer and found her lying on the ground, and a little black creature wriggling behind her hindlegs. He exclaimed with joy:

"Come and look! She has thrown a foal!"

Liu Kuei-lan was roasting potatoes in the cinders of the charcoal in the brazier, when she heard this. She left the potatoes, leaped off the *kang* and ran out barefoot, crying:

"You don't say! Where's the little creature?"

Under the starlight, Kuo saw his wife standing barefoot on the wet ground and he said reproachfully:

"What's this? Such a cold night, and you stand here barefoot! Go back quick and put on your shoes."

She answered:

"Never you mind. Where's the little creature? The old thing did it without a sound."

The foal was lying by its mother's hindlegs, kicking its tiny hooves in an effort to get up, but in vain. It was wet and sticky all over, and shivering with cold. Kuo ran into the kitchen and came back with a tattered gunny-bag. He squatted beside the foal, wiped it, covered it with the bag, nipped off the umbilical cord, picked the foal up, wrapped it in the skirt of his long gown and made for the room, with his wife in tow. The dam began neighing, struggling to rise but in vain. Kuo laid the foal gently down on the *kang*, where it began again to kick its tiny legs—for a fleeting moment, it stood up, only to stagger and collapse. Greatly amused, Liu Kuei-lan broke into peals of laughter, which woke up Old Tien in the west wing. With a padded coat slung over his shoulders, the old man hurried into the room, and, seeing the foal, exclaimed:

"Oh! This! Such a happy event, and she kept silent. Let me take a look—ah, it's a male."

Liu Kuei-lan was still laughing merrily.

"Yes! If he hadn't gone out, the little thing might have frozen to death! Such cold weather."

Old Tien felt the *kang* mat with his hand and said:

"Too cold. Put more fuel into the *kang* stove, quick. Eh! Youngsters are strong and healthy and don't heat the *kang*." Lifting the *kang* mat, the old man saw underneath a layer of corn-cobs which were still warm, and here he laid the foal to warm up and dry. Liu Kuei-lan lighted a pine twig, stepped into the outer room, pushed some twigs into the *kang* stove, kindled a fire, then put in dry firewood. The flames began to leap out of the stove, lighting up her rosy face and a few stray wisps of hair hanging over her forehead, and reddening her white close-fitting blouse. She pushed back her hair, stood up and went into the inner room. Mrs. Tien, although she was blind, had got up to join in the fun, but now, having had enough of it, she went back to her room again to sleep. Kuo, squatting on the end of the *kang*, was carefully wiping the foal with the gunny-bag. Old Tien, sitting on the edge of the *kang*, fixing his eyes on the foal, was leisurely tracing its lineage: "Its dam was sold by Wang to Goodman Tu and its sire was hare-grey in colour and belonged to the landlord. Its dam in her young days was one of the most famous horses of the village—in the fields or hauling heavy loads, she was as good as any gelding. Let me look at the little hooves." Old Tien took in his hand a kicking hoof, examined it and pronounced: "Slender and pointed. It will be a fast and strong horse when it grows up. When it is two and a half, it will be big enough to do light jobs. At three, it will draw a cart. At five, castrate it, and it will work for you for over ten years."

As Kuo went on wiping the foal, he said:

"I promised you this foal."

Old Tien answered:

"But I can't accept it."

"I'm as good as my word. The foal is yours."

"I'll never take it."

"We'll talk about that later. Liu Kuei-lan, remember—when the little thing is weaned, tether it in Old Tien's stable." His wife

laughed and promised to do so. The old man continued to chat a while and then went back to his own rooms.

The young couple went on fondling the little foal and chatting. Liu Kuei-lan said:

"It's the time for manuring, and here she is lying in. What shall we do?"

Kuo answered:

"We can borrow a neighbour's horse for a short time, to give our mare a good rest. Now, all peasants have horses. Formerly, the landlords had all the horses and they gave a dam more than a month's rest after she'd thrown a foal—better treatment than a poor woman had when she was lying in. But a peasant's horse had to work again within ten days of foaling and that meant the dam hadn't enough milk for her young. Why, we've forgotten all about the mother! Go and get some kaoliang and bean-cakes for her. Feed her well and she will give good milk."

After a while, Liu Kuei-lan returned to the room, to find her husband combing the foal's fine brown hair and holding its neat little mouth in one hand. She lay on the *kang*, but sleep would not come. She continued to prattle. She wished they could have a small cart next year: then, Kuo could go up the hill for fuel without having to ask help from a neighbour. The sow was near her time, too. They must take good care of the vegetable garden at the back of the house this year, and plant it to gourds, garlic and other vegetables. She asked him with a smile: "You like sweet potatoes, don't you? I'll get some sprouts from Old Tien. Haven't we got land now? We can plant what we like to eat. Time was. . . ."

Kuo said nothing, puffing at his pipe. Liu Kuei-lan hugged the foal, gave it a caressing shake or two, stroked the fine hair on its back, then suddenly said:

"I forgot to tell you. . . ."

She paused, turning red to the tips of her ears. Kuo glanced at her and urged:

"Let's hear it."

She stuttered:

"I . . . I can't be sure yet—but I think I'm going to have a baby. . . ."

This put more red into her face, while in the depth of her heart

there was an inexpressible joy—she gave the foal a tighter hug, gluing its long, little face to hers. A sudden look of tenderness appeared on Kuo's face. He felt like saying something but thought better of it. Liu Kuei-lan kept on talking like a gramophone:

"Old Sun says it's a gentle melting in the Sungari this year: the ice is melting below and that means there's a good year ahead. They expect good crops. In the past, it was difficult to sow wheat without the help of a horse. Now, we and Old Tien can band together to plant two or three *mou* to wheat, and we'll have dumplings to eat for a couple of weeks at New Year."

Silent still Kuo was. Liu Kuei-lan patted the leg of the foal kicking against her thigh and continued:

"The willows are covered with little red specks: some of them are already budding. And at the tips of the twigs you can see tender, green leaves. The little swineherd Wu says the snow has melted on the hills, and the flowers have come out: *pinlang* and sweet tartar, donkeys' hooves and cats' ears, and wild peonies red as fire, yellow as a gander's feet or white as snow. The hills and valleys are dotted with them. All the colours of the rainbow they are, and they smell so sweet and look so pretty! He's sent you a root called *kounaitzu*." She stretched her hand underneath the mat and pulled out a yellowish root about two feet long. "This is *kounaitzu*—it can heal sickness and bring down fevers. And he says: 'If you make chopsticks out of it, they can detect any poison. If there is any poison in a dish of food, the chopsticks will smoke at the touch.' He is afraid that since you're a resolute fighter some reactionaries who hate you may try to poison you, so he wants you to have chopsticks like this to protect you."

Kuo laughed and commented:

"Nonsense! I've heard of *kounaitzu* being used as a medicine, but how can it discover poison? Don't believe what that child says."

Liu Kuei-lan continued to chat about the hills and the fields for a while, while Kuo could not make up his mind whether to tell her of his decision or not. At last she asked:

"What's the matter with you?"

Kuo felt he must tell her, so he blurted out:

"I'm joining up."

Taken aback, she let go of the foal and asked:

"What?"

"I'm going to join up."

She drew nearer and gasped:

"Do you mean it?"

"It's true. I've already told Team Leader Hsiao."

"Will he let you go?"

"Why not?"

"Can you leave the work of the Peasants' Association?"

"Somebody else will take over."

Liu Kuei-lan knew, then, that it was true. Since their marriage, she had hardly been able to bear being separated from him for half a day; and now he was going off, going to the front!

She said:

"All right, go." But her heart felt a pang. Her arms suddenly became limp, and the foal fell onto the *kang*, where it kicked its hooves in an effort to stand up. It staggered a minute on its tiny forelegs and at once fell on its side. As it rested its head on Liu Kuei-lan's feet, drops of water fell on its long twitching ears—more drops and more! The little creature did not know what this was—tears of a woman who was soon to part with her husband.

Kuo stuck his pipe in his waist-band, helped his wife off with her padded jacket and laid her down to sleep. Then, he himself took off his jacket, lay down, pillowed his head on the edge of the *kang* and said in a low voice:

"Don't cry. You upset me when you cry. So many men are going to the front. When the enemy is defeated, I'll come home. Team Leader Hsiao says: 'It won't be long before Chiang Kai-shek's army is knocked out.'"

She continued to sob. The hatred Kuo had felt for the bandits surged up in him again. He hardened his heart and scolded:

"What are you crying for? Do you want to hold me back? Do you want to fall behind the rest?"

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she answered:

"I won't cry any more. I won't."

But her tears continued to course down her cheeks and drip onto the mat like a snapped string of pearls. She said between suppressed sobs:

"I know it's right, your joining up. I don't need anybody to

tell me that. Only I can't bear it. We've been married only a few days."

Kuo broke her off:

"We'll be together always—in future."

Wiping her eyes once more, she said:

"I wish I were a man and could go along."

"Your work at home is just as important. Let's think what has to be done before I go. There will be a meeting tomorrow, when I'll apply."

Her head against his chest, so that her hair brushed his chin, she answered in a low tone:

"You needn't worry about the home. We have everything we need. How long do you think you'll be gone?"

"It can't be too long. Chiang Kai-shek and his American masters will be defeated easily. I'll be home in a year or two. I may even bring back a medal."

"You haven't prepared clothes or bedding yet. Won't that take a few days?"

"Don't worry about that. I shan't need to take anything. I'll be leaving in a day or two. I'm going to ask somebody to take care of you at home. There you go again! Women are like that. Don't cry. Listen! The cock is crowing; we must rest a while before we get up. I forget to tell you—I've told Team Leader Hsiao about your request, and you must take the matter up with him yourself."

"What matter?" Flustered by her husband's imminent departure, Liu Kuei-lan could not think what he meant.

"Your request to join the Party."

Liu Kuei-lan raised her head. Her husband was a Communist, and she wanted to join the Party too. She wanted to do what he did. If she could join the Party, she would learn a lot, and that would bring her closer to Kuo. She asked in haste:

"What did Team Leader Hsiao say? Am I qualified?"

Glancing at her tear-stained face, Kuo said:

"You're qualified all right, but you mustn't cry. If you cry any more, you won't be up to standard. Communists don't cry."

"I won't cry any more. I won't."

XXIX

THE recruiting meeting took place in the playground of the village school, where red flags were waving in the breeze. When it was announced that Kuo Chuan-hai had joined up, over thirty other young men applied then and there. The elder son of Mrs. Wang, who had only recently married, declared: "I'll follow Chairman Kuo wherever he goes, climbing mountains, crossing rivers or going to the other side of the Great Wall." Wu Chia-fu, the little swineherd, also joined up.

Giving his beard an energetic twitch, Old Sun said: "I'm going strong at fifty-one. At eighty, Tai Kung met Emperor Wen. We have beaten all the small Chiang Kai-sheks in this village; now we must go and beat Chiang Kai-shek himself. Then we can come back and live in peace."

Liu Teh-shan also wanted to sign up, saying: "I'm a middle peasant and have a place in the sun. I'll go to the front. I needn't worry about my family: the Peasants' Association will take care of them." Seven other young middle peasants followed his example. Big Li kept silent throughout the rally, after which he went home, packed up, and drove a cart loaded with all his possessions in the smithy to the house of a cousin of his who lived outside the West Gate. She asked in surprise:

"What are you doing?"

While unloading his chattels, he answered:

"I'm going to the front, to fight Chiang Kai-shek. When he is defeated, I'll come back to my forge. Meanwhile, keep these things for me."

He was off the next instant to the Peasants' Association, where he told Hsiao:

"I enlisted long ago. You must let me go."

Hsiao stared at him, saying:

"Must you go? Who's to run the Peasants' Association?"

"You can find somebody else. I must go. They're all going to be combat heroes—how can I stay behind? I've been to the front with the stretcher unit. I wouldn't have come back when I did if I hadn't been charged with the job of bringing back the whole group."

Hsiao said:

"A Communist doesn't think the way you do. The front and the rear are equally important. No, you can't go. Some older members of the Party must remain behind. If Kuo goes, you can't."

The small groups of the Peasants' Association set on foot a kind of competition. Some peasants made up their minds that they would be happier fighting against the enemy, some insisted upon following Kuo Chuan-hai's example, and some were acting on the advice of family members, friends or members of the small groups. For three days and nights, the rally went on with parents prevailing upon sons, wives upon husbands, and brothers upon brothers, all inspired by the example of Kuo, who had become the standard of the rally. On the fourth morning, Kuo and the other Party members who had joined up rode in to the district Party committee to report; when they returned to the village, it was already noon. Hsiao was in the north room of the Association going over the list of applicants, which now totalled one hundred and twenty-eight. Coming upon the name Tu Ching-yu, Hsiao raised his eyebrows and asked Kuo:

"Have I seen this name before?"

Kuo answered:

"He's Goodman Tu's nephew, who was in the puppet Manchukuo army for two years. He came back to this village from Changchun after the Japanese surrender."

Hsiao said:

"Hold this man over for the time being."

Kuo asked:

"Is it because he belongs to the family of a landlord?"

Hsiao answered:

"A relative of a landlord or a rich peasant is all right. Nor does it matter that he was a soldier during the Manchukuo time. The question is how he got to Changchun and how he came back. Such points must be cleared up first. We can't afford to let into our army a fellow about whose background we've no knowledge."

Hsiao continued to read the list and as he did so he crossed out the names of Donkey Li, Old Sun, Old Chu, Wu Chia-fu and some others. Chang Ching-shui's brother Chang Ching-hsiang was already in the army, and for this reason his mother asked to have Chang Ching-shui left at home—Hsiao struck out his name. After careful consideration, out of the one hundred and twenty-eight men, Hsiao

selected forty-one. These forty-one men all came from poor peasant or farmhand families and were sturdy fellows between eighteen and twenty-eight.

In the kitchen of the Peasants' Association, three cooks were busy slicing meat, mincing pickles, stewing pork, preparing a send-off feast for the next day. On the high wooden gate frame of the West Gate the militiamen set up a gaily decorated archway of pine branches. In the classroom of the school, by the light of two bean-oil lamps, Mrs. Pai, Mrs. Chao, Liu Kuei-lan and a dozen other women were clipping and making flowers out of sheets of red and green glazed paper.

It was after midnight when Liu Kuei-lan returned home. She gave Kuo the four eggs she had boiled for him, and they chatted as they waited for the dawn. Kuo was the first up—while dressing, he reminded his wife:

"Mind you, don't cry today!"

Quickly sweeping her hand across her eyes, she answered:

"Yes, I know."

Kuo went into the kitchen, threw the pole with two buckets across his shoulder, strode out to the well, carried back two bucketfuls of water which he poured into the vat, then said to his wife: "At night, always have enough water in the kitchen, and don't pile fuel near the stove, for fear of a fire." He went to the open stable and gave the mare some more hay and bean-cakes. Then, he curried her with an iron comb. Sucking at his pipe, he walked about the house to see that everything was in order. There was fuel enough to last a year; there was not enough paddy straw, and he told his wife to plait straw-hats before she was busy in the spring, and barter them for more straw in the next village. He was giving her various other instructions when a militiaman came to call him to the meeting, and off he went.

It was an early morning in April. Except for a few white spots between puddles in the shade, the snow and ice had melted. The green water in the gutter on the roadside was running noisily again, and flock after flock of geese and ducks were swimming merrily downstream, cackling gaily. Now that the snow had melted, a south wind was blowing which did not nip your face even in the early morning. The willows and elms were bursting into leaf, looking like variegated clouds anchored against a background of blue

sky. Sparrows were chirping and hopping from twig to twig, while thin white wisps of smoke were rising from the thatched roofs of the village. Every yard was piled with fuel reaching the level of the eaves; backyards and corners were filled with firewood stacked in neat mounds and pyramids like wooden walls.

Troughs were filled with kaoliang, bean-cakes and hay. Ploughs, hoes and other implements were everywhere in evidence: the villagers were getting ready for the spring sowing.

As the rays of the sun were streaming through the willows in the east, the village band struck up. Trumpets blew, drums rolled and gongs crashed; then followed the bugles and drums of school children. Militiamen, schoolboys and schoolgirls, and members of the Children's League, the Old People's League, the Peasants' Association and the Women's Association lined up on either side of the road. The big red flag of the Peasants' Association was fluttering in the breeze. Then, three four-horse, four-wheeled carts sped along the road towards the West Gate. The driver of the first cart was Old Sun, swinging a whip decorated with a strip of red cloth. Outside the West Gate, the three carts came to a halt.

Trumpets, accompanied by bugles and drums, played a martial tune in honour of the forty-one men who had just been feted at the Peasants' Association and had now arrived at the West Gate. The farewell groups had followed them to outside the West Gate where they got down from the carts and lined up on the roadside with Kuo Chuan-hai standing at the head facing south. The gongs and drums stopped, and the flutes played. Mrs. Pai and Liu Kuei-lan, who were chairman and vice-chairman of the Women's Association, stepped out of the files holding in their hands bunches of red flowers. Liu Kuei-lan stood facing Kuo Chuan-hai, and, as the bugle sounded once more, all eyes were turned upon them in amazement and with respect. Mrs. Sun said in a whisper to Mrs. Wang:

"They have been married for only twenty-odd days—less than a month."

Mrs. Wang answered:

"It's for our sake. My elder boy insists upon going too."

Nobody heard their whispers: all the others were watching Liu Kuei-lan pinning a red flower onto Kuo's coat. He tried at first to avoid her gaze but very soon, in spite of himself, he looked into her eyes and saw that they were flooding with tears. He spoke in a barely audible voice:

"I'll come back soon. Don't worry about me. Don't cry."

Liu Kuei-lan felt like sobbing out loud, but she controlled herself. Nobody but Old Tien, who was standing beside them, saw her tears and heard what Kuo said. The old man wiped his own eyes with his dried, blue-veined hand. Presently, Liu Kuei-lan's hands began to tremble, and the flower dropped to the ground, to be swept off by a puff of wind. Hurriedly and nervously she picked out another red flower and stuck it in Kuo's button-hole, then stepped aside. The first flower stopped before a cart, and Old Sun quickly jumped down, picked it up and pinned it onto his own coat. Wu Chia-fu said:

"Look, Old Sun is wearing a flower too."

Old Sun answered:

"It's an honour to join the army, and it's a bit of an honour to see them off. I did apply, but Team Leader Hsiao wanted me to remain in the village, saying that it was equally important driving a cart in the rear. I would have gone if he hadn't asked me to stay. No man worth his salt wants to stay at home all the time, to keep his wife company, and listen all day to her blether."

Mrs. Sun overheard this and she retorted:

"You're the one to blether. You wanted to go, but they had no use for you."

The band ceased to play, and Mrs. Wang began to speak on behalf of the families of the armymen although actually every word she said was addressed to her own son:

"Don't worry about us at home. We've house and horse, and want for nothing. I'll take good care of your wife: don't pine for her. Remember—although we've stood up, the poor people in the south haven't yet. How can we enjoy a good life and forget those folk who are still in the pit of fire? Go and fight bravely."

Kuo stepped forward and said:

"What Mrs. Wang said just now was meant for us all. We must try to do well in the army—must try to win merits. Our glory will be the glory of the whole village."

Big Li stepped forward to face the forty-one, and gave them a military salute which he had learned as a stretcher-bearer. He said, holding his hand aloft:

"On behalf of the Peasants' Association, I salute you all. Go ahead with light hearts. Leave the rear to us, and we'll guarantee that the pot-bellied reactionaries won't dare rise against us. While

you go to the front to win victories and take prisoners, we'll produce more grain and pay more tax in kind in the rear. We'll dry the grain, thresh it clean, and send it to you at the front. You'll eat well and fight well, defeat the Chiang bandits soon and come home soon to enjoy peace."

The drums rolled in the intermission. Then Team Leader Hsiao made a simple speech:

"You are the pick of the labouring people of Northeast China. You are the representatives of the workers and peasants of Yuanmao. You are the neighbours of our martyr Chao Yu-lin. I hope that you will do well at the front. Today you go decorated with flowers and soon you will come back with medals. Thanks to the able leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the wise strategy of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, we shall defeat Chiang Kai-shek's troops and liberate the whole country before long. Then, you will come marching home in triumph." He paused and, pointing his finger at the immense expanse of dark fields stretching out before him, went on: "Then, on this vast rich plain, we shall work together to produce more and more. We shall use horses, to begin with; eventually, we shall use tractors, like our Soviet brothers."

Hsiao was applauded thunderously by all, soldiers and peasants. He concluded:

"Now please get up on to the carts. Take with you my sincere wish that you may all become combat heroes and march homewards to this village in triumph!"

The trumpet sounded once more and the bugle followed with the tune "Victory." As the soldiers mounted one after another on to the carts, the boys and girls of the school sang *Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China*. The carts started to move amid music and song. Old Sun "whoa-whoaed" and "chia-chiaed" spiritedly, and the twelve fat, strong horses trotted forward, then broke into a gallop, until the carts dwindled into specks moving westward. Then the villagers turned homewards. Hsiao and Big Li walked side by side along the road, talking in a low voice about the future work. Hsiao said:

"Call Chang Ching-shui, Mrs. Pai, Mrs. Chao and Liu Kuei-lan to the Peasants' Association, and we'll discuss what has to be done hereafter. We must begin to build up and consolidate the Party, and then set up a Party branch in this village to replace the land

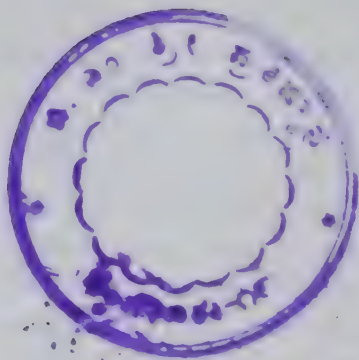
reform work team. We'll rely on the Party branch to give leadership to all work in the village." Stepping into the courtyard of the Peasants' Association, he added:

"And there is the question of Hua Yung-hsi. We must consider that, too."

That night, Old Sun drove home from the county town by moonlight. He brought a message from Kuo to his wife: "Don't worry about me. Set your heart on your work. When the foal is weaned, give it to Old Tien."

December 2, 1948, Harbin

THE END



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chou Li-po was born in a village in Iyang County, Hunan Province, in 1908. His father was a village school teacher, and his two elder brothers are both middle peasants.

After finishing junior secondary school in 1927, Chou Li-po was compelled by poverty to leave school, and went to Shanghai. In 1929, he passed the entrance examination at the free University for Workers. Eight months later, however, he was expelled by the reactionary university authorities for his leftist ideology and revolutionary activities.

In the winter of 1931, on the recommendation of a schoolmate, he got a job as a proof-reader in a printing-house in Shanghai. In 1932, he was arrested by the Kuomintang reactionaries for taking part in a strike at the press and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison. Released in 1934, he joined the China Federation of Left-Wing Writers and was admitted to the Communist Party of China. Since then, he has held a number of posts, serving as editor of magazines and newspapers, war correspondent, translator from English, teacher at Lu Hsun Arts' Institute in Yenian and head of the Editing and Translation Department of the same institute.

Other works by Chou Li-po include *My Impressions of the Shansi-Chahar-Hopei Border Region*, *Diary at the Front*, and *In the Soviet Union*. *The Hurricane*, written after he had participated in the land reform in the Northeast in 1946, won a Stalin Prize for Literature in 1951. Chou Li-po also helped to write the scenario of the film *Liberated China*, which won a Stalin Prize in 1950. In addition to writing, he has translated many literary classics, including Pushkin's *Dubrovsky* and Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*.





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